

## English 12 – Literary Terms and Devices

- Allergy:** An extended narrative that carries a second meaning along with the surface story.
- Alliteration:** The repetition of sounds in nearby words.
- Assonance:** The repetition of vowel sounds.  
*'Or sinking as the light wind lines or dies,'*  
*She sells sea shells by the sea shore.*
- Allusion:** An allusion is a brief, direct, or indirect reference to a presumably familiar figure, place, or event from history, literature, mythology, or the Bible. Most allusions expand on or develop a significant idea, impression, or mood.  
*He met his Waterloo; Cupid's arrow struck them.*
- Anagnorisis:** In drama, the disclosure of the true circumstances or recognition of the hero's true self or nature.
- Analogy:** A resemblance between two things, sometimes expressed as a simile.  
*This packaging is like an egg.*
- Anecdotal Evidence:** An informal account of evidence in the form of anecdote (interesting or humorous incident) or hearsay.
- Antagonist:** The antagonist is the major character or force that opposes the protagonist, a rival or opponent of the protagonist. In simple stories the antagonist is the bad guy.
- Antithesis:** A figure of speech in which sharply contrasting ideas are juxtaposed in a balanced or parallel phrase or grammatical structure. The second and contrasting part of such a juxtaposition.  
*Too black for heaven, and yet too white for hell.*
- Apôstrophe:** Directly addressing an abstract quality or a nonexistent person as though it were present.  
*Death, where is thy sting?*
- Archaic Language:** Language which is no longer used in actual speech. The use of archaisms has been a common device in poetry up to the twentieth century.
- Archetype:** An original model or type after which similar things are patterned; and example of a type.  
*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: the archetype of the mad scientist.*
- Aside:** A short passage spoken in an undertone, usually directed to the audience. By convention, the aside is presumed to be inaudible to the other characters on stage.
- Atmosphere:** The mood which is established by the totality of the literary work. In the first act of Macbeth, the presence of the three witches establishes the atmosphere of the play which is dark and somber.
- Autobiography:** An account of one's own life, generally a continuous narrative of major events.

**Ballad:** A narrative poem, usually containing much repetition and often a repeated refrain.

**Bias:** A prejudice in a general or specific sense, usually in the sense of having a preference to one particular point of view or ideological perspective

**Blank Verse:** A form of verse which is written in iambic pentameter and is not rhymed.

**Cacophony:** Discordant or harsh sounds introduced for poetic effect.

*But when loud surges lash the sounding shore.*

**Caesura:** A significant pause within a line of poetry. Used to make the reader consider an idea or to show a transition in thought.

*To be or not to be / that is the question.*

**Catharsis:** In drama, the purification of guilt on the part of a character.

**Caricature:** A character consisting of certain selected features exaggerated for comic effect. For example, Eric Cartman in South Park is a caricature of an American, middleclass boy.

**Catastrophe:** When something terrible happens; please note, in Greek tragedy, the catastrophe usually occurs at the end of the play and is not resolved.

**Chance:** The occurrence of an event which has no apparent cause in antecedent/events or in predisposition of character.

**Character:** This is a term used to describe the fictional persons who carry out the action of a story, and the moral and dispositional qualities of a fictional person in a story. The latter is generally revealed through dialogue, action, and description.

**Flat Character:** A flat character embodies a single idea or quality; it can be summed up in one sentence.

**Round Character:** A round character has more complexity of characterization than a flat character.

**Stock/Stereotyped Character:** These are minor characters that frequently appear in fiction and are familiar to readers: the strong sheriff, the mad scientist, the damsel in distress, the villain dressed in black and the cruel stepmother.

**Dynamic/Developing Character:** A character, often the protagonist, who undergoes a significant, lasting change, usually in his or her outlook on life, is a dynamic character. This permanent change in some aspect of his behaviour or life is either for the better or worse.

**Static Character:** The static character does not experience change or development in the story. Static characters are minor characters, and they are often stock characters. Flat characters are similar: they have very few characteristics and do not undergo change.

**Character Motivation:** This causes the character to do what he does. For example, a character may steal some food for several possible reasons: hunger, thrill of stealing, or peer pressure.

**Characterization:** Characterization is a method for presenting the special qualities or features of a character in literary work. Basically, the short story will either

reveal character directly (through author comments) or indirectly (through the character's speech, thought and action).

**Direct Characterization:** A writer tells you directly what the character is like.  
*He bore a mean scowl as he entered the bar. Anyone who saw him knew he was looking for a fight.*

**Indirect Characterization:** A writer lets you arrive at your own conclusions regarding a character. The author shows the character's actions, words, and thoughts, also revealing how he treats others.

*He entered the dark saloon with his fists clenched. As he sauntered over to the bar he caught the eye of a tough looking cowboy. "What?" he growled.*

**Chorus:** In Greek drama the chorus served many purposes such as narrator, commentator, and/or a character themselves; sometimes the chorus acts as a lyric element. In Elizabethan drama, the chorus often introduces major sections of the play.

**Cinquain:** A stanza of five lines.

**Cliché:** An overused expression or phrase which has lost its vitality; it is a sign of the failure of the imagination.

*The students were "as busy as bees."*

**Climax:** From the reader's perspective, the climax is the highest point of emotional intensity in a story. It usually marks the turning point in the protagonist's fortunes and the major crisis of the story. This is the peak of the action or development, normally the highest point of interest. Usually at this point we know how the story will end.

**Coincidence:** Chance compounded (see chance).

**Colloquialism:** using informal or slang language.

*"So, like, I told the dude to back off man."*

**Conclusion/Denouement:** This is the concluding portion where thoughts may be unraveled. It explains details that require clarification that could not have been revealed before the climax.

**Comic Relief:** A humorous scene, incident, or speech within a serious literary work.  
**Complicating Incident (or Complication):** The incident that initiates a conflict is the complicating incident.

**Conceit:** See extended metaphor.

**Conflict:** A conflict is a struggle between opposing characters of forces, usually the protagonist and someone or something else. The three main conflicts are:  
**Man against Environment:** Conflict between a character and his or her environment (whether this be nature, society, or circumstance); external conflict.

**Man against Man:** Conflict between two characters. This struggle may be physical, emotional, or psychological; external conflict.

**Man against Himself:** Conflict with another character. The character in this case experiences a conflict in emotion or thought; internal conflict.

**Connotation:** The implications or suggestions that are evoked by a word.

**Contrast (and Juxtaposition):** Contrast refers to overlap or mixing of situations, characters, settings, moods, or points of view in order to clarify meaning, purpose, or character, or to heighten certain moods (especially humor, horror, and suspense). Using opposites (hot/cold, good/evil, black/white, humility/pride, compassionate/callous) enhances development. Contrast is helpful for pointing out the differences between characters. Juxtaposition refers to dramatic contrasts that are deliberately placed side by side within a story.

**Couplet:** A stanza of two lines

**Denotation:** The thing or situation to which a word refers, exclusive of attitudes or feelings which the writer or speaker may have; a word's most literal and limited meaning. Thus, the denotation of *elephant* is a large, five-toed mammal with an extraordinary trunk and long tusks of ivory. If the word, however suggests to the listener or reader *elephantiness* or *remarkable memory*, it has acquired connotations. See connotation.

**Denouement (or Resolution):** Denouement is a French term to describe the "unknotting" of plot and conflict following a climax.

**Deus Ex Machina:** An unexpected, artificial, or improbable character, device, or event introduced suddenly in a work of fiction or drama to resolve a situation or untangle a plot.

**Dialect:** A variety of a language characteristic of a particular group of the language's speakers. The term is applied most often to regional speech patterns, but a dialect may also be defined by other factors, such as social class

**Dialogue:** The speeches of characters in a narrative or a play.

**Diction:** The choice and arrangement of words in a literary work.

**Didactic:** When the primary aim of a work of literature is to expound some moral, political, or other teaching it is called "didactic."

**Dilemma:** A dilemma is a situation in which a character must make a difficult choice between two disagreeable, undesirable, or unfavorable alternatives. Dilemma is one method by which an author can generate conflict and suspense in a story.

**Direct Presentation:** See Characterization (Direct Characterization).

**Dissonance:** A synonym for cacophony, see cacophony.

**Double Entendre:** A phrase which can be understood in two different ways.

*"The Most Dangerous Game," by Richard Connell, in which the title can refer both to the "game" that is most dangerous to hunt, and the "game" that is most dangerous to play.*

**Dramatic Monologue:** A poem consisting of the words of a single character who reveals in his speech his own nature and the dramatic situation. Unlike the stage soliloquy, in which place and time have been previously established and during which the character is alone, the dramatic monologue itself reveals place, time, and the identities of the characters.

**Dystopia:** A society characterized by human misery, such as squalor, disease, oppression, etc.

**Elegy:** A formal poem, often written as a lament for a departed friend or respected person. The poet usually sets forth his or her ideas about death or some other serious subject.

**End Rhyme:** Rhyme occurring at the ends of verse lines.

*Ansel Adams was a picture taker,  
his photos focused on mother nature.*

**Epic:** An extended narrative poem, exalted in style and heroic in theme. The poet begins by announcing his theme, invoking the aid of a muse, and asking her an epic question, with the reply to which the story begins. He then launches his action in the middle of things. Examples of epics are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

**Epiphany:** An epiphany is a moment of significant realization and insight experienced by the protagonist.

**Epigram:** A short, usually witty statement, graceful in style and ingenious in thought.

*Man is a rational animal who always loses his temper when he is called upon to act in accordance with the dictates of reason. Oscar Wilde.*

**Epitaph:** A quotation preceding a book, chapter, or poem, often intended to evoke something of its theme or atmosphere.

**Escapist Fiction:** This refers to a form of story which is designed to help the reader escape the daily cares and problems of reality. Escapist fiction has lively melodramatic plots and stereotyped or flat characters, and it requires limited involvement on the part of the reader. Most commercial science fiction, westerns, and romances fall into the category of escapist fiction.

**Euphemism:** substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for one considered harsh, blunt, or offensive.

*"He is at rest" rather than "he is dead."*

**Euphony:** The use of compatible, harmonious sounds to produce a pleasing, melodious effect.

*And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows.*

**Exposition:** In drama, the part in the play in which the audience is given the background information which it needs to know.

**Extended Metaphor:** An extended metaphor, also called a conceit, is a metaphor that continues into the following sentences. An extended metaphor is also a metaphor developed at great length, occurring frequently in or throughout a work.

*The winds were ocean waves, thrashing against the trees' limbs. The gales remained thereafter, only ceasing when the sun went down. Their waves clashed brilliantly with the water beneath, bringing foam and flying leaves to the shore.*

**Fable:** A brief narrative, in either verse or prose, which illustrates some moral truth. The characters are often animals, but are not invariably so.

**Falling Action:** The part of a story immediately following a climax and lasting until the end of the story.

**Fantasy:** In a literary work, a radical departure, sometimes bizarre or grotesque, from our sense of the "real" world or from the literary conventions of realism. For example, *Alice in Wonderland*.

**Farce:** Originally any insertion in the church liturgy. Later, farces were the comic scenes interpolated in the early liturgical plays. The words now refers to any play which evokes laughter by such devices of low comedy as physical buffoonery, rough wit, or the creations of ridiculous situations, and which is little concerned with subtlety of characterization or probability of plot.

**Figurative Language:** Variations from the normal order, structure, or meaning of words to gain strength and depth of expression or to create a visual or other sensory effect in the reader's mind: similes, metaphors, personification, and so on.

**Figures of Speech:** The various techniques or devices of figurative language.

**Flashback:** Scenes presented of events that occurred in the past. A flashback is a quick summary of past events. A flashback is a plot device which shifts the story from the past to the present, usually to illustrate an important point or to reveal a change in character.

**Foil:** A character whose behaviour, attitudes, and opinions contrast with those of the protagonist. The foil helps the reader to better understand the character and motivation of the protagonist.

**Foreshadowing:** Hints or clues about something that will occur later in the story. Foreshadowing prepares the reader for the climax, the resolution, and for changes or lack of changes in character attitude.

**Free Verse:** Lacks regular meter and line length. Regular patterns are not followed.

**Genre:** A literary type or class. Some of the recognized genres are epic, tragedy, and comedy.

**Hamartia:** In drama, the movement of the hero from happiness to through some frailty or error ("tragic flaw").

**Hero:** Traditionally, a character who has such admirable traits as courage, idealism, and fortitude.

**Hubris:** In drama, excessive pride and self-confidence (often associated with the hamartia).

**Humour:** The most general of the terms denoting the laughable.

**Hyperbole:** Deliberate exaggeration.

*I have a million questions for homework tonight.*

**Iambic Pentameter:** A metrical foot made up of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable that consists of five metric feet

**Idiom:** an expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal definitions and the arrangement of its parts, but refers instead to a figurative meaning that is known only good use.

*He kicked the bucket (referring to death rather than actually kicking a bucket).*

**Images:** Images are concrete details and figures of speech that help the reader to form vivid sense impressions of what is being described.

**Imagery:** The collection or pattern of images within a poem or other artistic work.

an event or an idea. The intent is usually to create a single, unified impression on the reader.

**Melodrama:** A drama, such as a play, film, or television program, characterized by exaggerated emotions, stereotypical characters, and interpersonal conflicts.

**Metaphor:** A comparison between two items that is not literally applicable.

**Metre:** The pattern of stressed syllables which occurs at regular intervals and makes up the rhythm of a verse.

**Metonymy:** The name of some object or idea is substituted for another.

*When I consider how my light (used instead of life) is spent.*

**Monologue:** An extended speech by one person.

**Mood:** The feeling or emotional atmosphere present in the literary work.

**Myth:** An anonymous tale, supposedly historical, the origins of which are unknown.

**Narrative:** A poem that tells a story and organizes its action according to a sequence of time (though not necessarily in chronological order).

**Narration:** An account, story, or narrative.

**Narrator:** The being telling the story.

**Objective Point of View:** The author presents his characters in an impersonal, noncommittal fashion without offering any judgment of them or their actions.

**Octave:** An eight line stanza.

**Ode:** A poem on an exalted theme, expressed in dignified, sincere language, serious in tone, and usually in praise of something or somebody.

**Onomatopoeia:** Words that imitate the sounds they represent.

*Hiss, buzz, bang.*

**Overstatement:** An exaggerated statement. Synonym for hyperbole.

*My feet are killing me.*

*A roaring silence.*

**Paradox:** A statement that may seem to be absurd but is actually true.

*Fair is foul, and foul is fair.*

*I came, I saw, I conquered.*

**Parallelism:** The use of identical or equivalent syntactic constructions in corresponding clauses or phrases.

**Parody:** A poem written in humorous imitation of another poem. Usually, the parody imitates the tone, form and imagery or the original, but applies them to some ridiculous object.

**Pastoral:** Literature concerning country life.

**Pathetic Fallacy:** The attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects (such an attribution usually falls short of full personification).

**Pathos:** That quality in a work of literature which evokes from the reader feelings of pity, tenderness, and sympathy.

**Pentameter:** Five metric feet per line.

**Peripety:** In drama, the sudden reversal of the hero's fortune from good to bad.

**Indeterminate Ending:** A story ending in which there is not clear outcome or result: is called an indeterminate ending.

**Indirect Presentation:** See Characterization (Indirect Characterization).

**Internal Rhyme:** Rhyme which occurs within lines of poetry.

*Now Sam McKee was from Tennessee where the cotton blooms and blows.*

**Introduction:** It provides necessary background details. The purpose of the introduction is:

- to arouse the readers' interest
- to introduce the main characters
- to give an idea of the setting (time and place)
- to give clues about what action might follow

**Irony:** What you expect to happen does not happen and/or what you do not expect to happen does happen. Irony is a literary device which reveals concealed or contradictory meaning(s). Three common forms of irony are:

**Verbal:** Occurs when a contrast is evident between what a character says and what the character actually means.

**Dramatic:** Occurs when the author shares with the reader information not known by a character. As a result, the reader becomes aware that a character's actions may be inappropriate for the actual circumstances, that what is to come is the reverse of what a character expects, or that a character has unknowingly made a comment which anticipates the outcome. The words or acts of a character in a play may carry a meaning unperceived by himself but understood by the audience.

**Situational:** Occurs when a set of circumstances turns out differently from what is expected or considered appropriate.

**Jargon:** The language or vocabulary, peculiar to a particular trade, profession, or group. *Medical jargon.*

**Juxtaposition:** The act or instance of placing two things close together or side by side. This is often done in order to compare/contrast the two, to show similarities or differences. In literature, a juxtaposition occurs when two images that are otherwise not commonly brought together appear side by side or structurally close together; thereby forcing the reader to stop and reconsider the meaning of the text through the contrasting images, ideas, motifs.

*He was slouched alertly.*

**Legend:** A story, sometimes of a national or folk hero, which has a basis in fact but which also includes imaginative material.

**Literal Language:** Literal expressions denote what they mean according to common or dictionary usage.

**Litotes:** A figure of speech consisting of an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite.

*This is no small problem.*

**Lyric:** A short poem expressing the internal and emotional thoughts of a single speaker.

Lyrics are usually an expression of the poet's feelings about a person, an object,

**Personification:** A figure of speech in which a non-human thing is given human attributes.

*The chair groaned under the weight of the fat man.*

**Plot:** The events or incidents of the literary work. The plot is the framework of the story, the storyline or organization of incidents within a story. It consists of episodes and conflict. Plots usually have rising and falling action, a climax, and a denouement.

**Point of View:** The point of view is the perspective from which a story is seen or told. Importantly, it established the relationships of author, reader, and protagonist. The three most common points of view are:

**First-person narrative:** Features the protagonist telling his or her own story directly to the reader in the first person (I, me, we, us). This point of view tells us what the main character thinks and feels from a vantage point "inside" the story and the protagonist.

**Limited omniscient narrative (third-person narrative):** Refers to the main characters as "he" or "she," and shows us only what one character thinks and feels from the perspective of someone "outside" the story. The author tells the story in third person but only through the viewpoint of one person. He can only see, hear, and know what one person can know.

**Omniscient narrative (third-person narrative):** Reveals the minds of several characters, knowing and telling all from a God-like perspective "outside" the story. The author or narrator knows and sees whatever he wishes. The writer can move from character to character and from scene to scene at will, passing whatever information he wishes to the reader or audience.

**Prologue:** An opening section of a longer work.

**Propaganda:** Biased material meant to persuade the audience.

*"Big Brother is Watching YOU"*

**Proverb:** A short popular saying, generally an observation or a piece of advice.

*A stitch in time saves nine.*

**Protagonist:** The leading character, often the main hero of the story.

**Pun:** A play on words that are alike

*The salesman was peddling bikes.*

**Quatrain:** A four lined stanza.

**Refrain:** A line or lines repeated at intervals during a poem, usually at the end of each stanza.

**Repetition:** Words, sounds, devices, are repeated primarily for the sake of emphasis; repetition is the most effective device for precise emotional responses such as anger, fear, sorrow, defiance, and so forth.

*Alone, alone, all, all, alone,*

*Alone on a wide wide sea!*

**Resolution:** The events following the climax of a play or story; the term is used synonymously with falling action.

**Rhetorical Question:** A question that is not asked to gain information but is used for stylistic effect.

*"God, why do you forsake me?"*

**Rhyme:** Similarity of vowel and all sounds after the vowel in the relevant words.

**Rhyme Scheme:** The pattern of rhyme within a stanza or poem. The rhyme scheme is usually shown by applying to each similar rhyme the same letter of the alphabet:

...steeple a

...town b

...people a

...down b

**Rhythm:** The pattern of stressed and unstressed sounds in a poem.

**Rising Action:** A series of steps or conflicts that precede the climax. During this stage of the story, background information is given, conflicts are introduced, and suspense is built up. There may even be moments of crisis.

**Round Character:** A realistic character having several sides to his/her character.

**Sarcasm:** Scornful and contemptuous criticism.

**Satire:** The use of irony to ridicule an idea, person, or thing, often to provoke change; humorous criticism.

**Seetel:** A six line stanza.

**Septet:** A stanza of seven lines.

**Setting:** The time and place of a story. The simple setting is when and where the story takes place. The mood is closely associated with the setting and consists of the emotional atmosphere created.

**Simile:** A direct statement of the similarity between two essentially different items usually through the use of a words such as like, as, or than.

*My love is like a red, red rose.*

**Slang:** Racy, unconventional language often limited to a certain time, place or group.

**Slang:** is the extreme of colloquial language, terminology used in conversation but hardly ever in an essay except for dialogue or special effects.

**Soliloquy:** A talk by a person who is alone.

**Sonnet:** A lyric poem of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter following one of several possible rhyme schemes.

**Stanza:** A group of two or more lines in a poem linked on the basis of length, metre, rhyme scheme, or thought.

**Static Character:** A character who does not change in the course of a story.

**Stereotype:** A stereotype is any fixed pattern of plot or character. Stereotyped characters are familiar figures in fiction such as the "hard-boiled" private investigator, the "absent-minded" professor.

**Stock Situation:** Frequently occurring incidents or patterns. Mistaken identity is an example of a stock situation.

**Style:** The individual manner in which an author expresses his or her thoughts and feelings. In fiction, style is basically determined by such grammatical and sensory aspects as diction, syntax, sentences, and images.

**Stream of Consciousness:** The depiction of the thoughts and feelings that flow with no apparent logic in the mind of a character or to create the effect of chaotic stream that we recognize in reality the writer presents the seemingly random mingling of thoughts, feelings and sense impressions of a character at a specific time.

**Surprise Ending:** The sudden twist in the direction of a story, producing a conclusion in which surprises the reader and often the story's characters as well.

**Suspense:** The feeling of anxiety and uncertainty experienced by the reader about the outcome of events or the protagonist's destiny.

**Symbol:** Something that stands for or represents something else.

*Heart as a symbol of love; black as a symbol of evil.*

**Synecdoche:** An expression where the part is put for the whole.

*Lend me your ears (give me your full attention).*

**Tercet:** A stanza of three lines.

**Theme:** The central idea of a story, usually implied rather than directly stated. Theme should not be confused with moral or plot. Theme deals with the larger issues of life and is a reflection on life. The reader identifies with messages presented in the literary work, relating those ideas to his personal experience. Theme is insight into the human condition. Specific characters and situations teach us general ideas or universal truths about human nature.

**Tone:** The relationship of the author with their material indicated by changes in voice and manner as well as verbal devices.

**Tragedy:** Moving from order to disorder in a literary work.

**Tragic Hero:** In drama, a person of stature who is neither villainous nor particularly virtuous.

**Understatement:** Something is deliberately underrated or said to be less than it is.

*Getting an A on your poetry assignment is not bad.*

**Unity:** All the parts of the literary work are related resulting in a cohesive story.

**Utopia:** A place that is ideal or perfect, particularly in its politics, ideals, morals etc.

**Verisimilitude:** The quality of appearing to be true or real.

**Verse:** Used with two meanings: first, referring to a line of poetry; second, as a general name given to poetry.

**Voice:** The character or mask assumed by the speaker or narration of a poem or a work of fiction.

**Wit:** Intellectually amusing statements.