

## **A (non-exhaustive) glossary of literary terms**

### **Alliteration**

The repetition of an initial consonant sound in words that are close together, such as within a single sentence or line of poetry.

### **Allusion**

An indirect reference to something outside the text, usually a person, place, thing, or idea that is generally familiar to the intended audience. Allusions often refer to historical events or people, other works of literature, mythology, or popular culture.

### **Anaphora**

The repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a series of sentences or clauses, usually creating a rhythmic effect.

### **Antithesis**

A rhetorical technique that uses parallel grammatical structure to contrast two opposing ideas.

*“Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.”*

### **Aphorism**

A brief, memorable statement that captures a broad, universal truth or idea.

*“God helps them that help themselves.” (Benjamin Franklin)*

### **Apostrophe**

A rhetorical device in which a speaker addresses either an inanimate object or a person who is absent or dead.

### **Assonance**

Repetition of similar vowel sounds within words and phrases, commonly used for a lyrical effect in poetry and other literary forms.

### **Chiasmus**

A figure of speech in which one phrase is followed by another that inverts its grammatical construction.

*“Bad men live that they may eat and drink; whereas good men eat and drink that they may live.” (Socrates)*

### **Consonance**

The repetition of one or more consonant sounds in words that are close together, such as within a single sentence or line of poetry; may include both initial consonant sounds (alliteration) or sounds within words.

*Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers; A peck of pickled peppers  
Peter Piper picked;*

### **Double Entendre**

A figure of speech with two possible interpretations, one of which is usually ironic or lewd.

*In Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio uses a **double entendre** to tell the Nurse that it is noon:*

*“Tis no less, I tell you, for the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon.”*

*The line literally means that the hand of the clock is pointing toward the prick (mark) of noon, but it can also be read as a reference to one’s hand being placed on a prick (penis).*

### **Epigram**

A brief, witty, satirical statement that is generally memorable on account of being paradoxical, humorous, or poetic.

*“. . . for there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.” (Oscar Wilde)*

### **Euphemism**

A figure of speech that softens an unpleasant or offensive idea by substituting a polite phrase instead.

### **Hero/Heroine**

The main character (protagonist) of a literary work, especially one who exhibits admirable traits such as courage and righteousness; in mythology, heroes/heroines also typically possess supernatural powers or other qualities.

### **Hyperbole**

An extreme exaggeration used to make a point, often humorously.

### **Idiom**

A commonly used figure of speech with a meaning that differs from its literal meaning. Many idioms are specific to one language or region.

***Idioms** are often difficult to translate into other languages because their literal meaning makes very little sense. For example, take the idiom “The world is your oyster,” which roughly means, “You can accomplish anything you want to.”*

### **Imagery**

Descriptive or figurative language that attempts to evoke mental images by appealing to the reader’s senses of sight, sound, smell, texture, or taste.

## **Irony**

A contrast between the intent and the literal meaning of words or action. Irony is not an unfortunate coincidence; rather, it is a planned and purposeful tool used to emphasize an idea.

## **Juxtaposition**

The placement of two very different ideas, characters, or actions close together in relation to each other, usually to draw attention to their contrasting traits.

## **Litotes**

A figure of speech consisting of an ironic understatement in which a positive statement is made by negating the opposite.

*I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection. (Jonathan Swift)*

## **Malapropism**

A misuse or mispronunciation of a word or phrase, often in the form of a word being replaced with a similar-sounding word; may be unintentional or intentional (usually for comic effect).

## **Metaphor**

A figure of speech that features a comparison between two disparate things that are not literally the same. Unlike similes, metaphors do not use the words “like” or “as.”

## **Metonymy**

A figure of speech in which the name of one object or concept is substituted for the name of something else that is closely related to it.

*No legislation passed on Capitol Hill without the support of the White House for years.*

## **Mood**

The emotional atmosphere of a work of literature, as evoked by setting, imagery, word choice, style, and tone. The mood may expand, deepen, or shift over the course of a work.

## **Onomatopoeia**

A word that nearly imitates the actual sound it describes.

## **Oxymoron**

A figure of speech linking two opposite or contradictory words or ideas together to form a neat paradox. Oxymorons may be employed to reveal contradictions, give the reader pause, or for comic effect.

**Parallelism**

The repetition of similar grammatical structures within a sentence or passage, often for emphasis or to draw connections between objects.

**Parody**

In literature, an imitation of another literary work that mocks, critiques, or makes light of the original.

**Personification**

A type of metaphor in which human attributes are assigned to inanimate objects or abstract ideas.

**Polysyndeton**

The repetition of conjunctions (and, but, for, etc.) to connect a series of words, clauses, or sentences. Polysyndeton may emphasize the relationships between the items in the series as well as add rhythm to a list when reciting.

**Pun**

A play on words that depends on substituting homophones (words that sound alike with different meanings, for example, “tail” and “tale”) or words that sound enough alike that using them interchangeably results in a humorous or provocative effect.

**Protagonist**

The main character in a narrative. The central plot of the story focuses on this character.

**Repetition**

Deliberately repeating a word or phrase two or more times in a text to add emphasis or bring clarity to a subject or event.

**Rhetorical Question**

A question asked by the speaker for effect, rather than because a response is needed or expected.

**Satire**

A literary style that ridicules human vice or folly, often through humor, irony, and sarcasm.

**Simile**

A figure of speech in which two objects are directly compared, usually including either “like” or “as” in the comparison.

**Stanza**

A group of lines in a poem that is separated from other lines, similar to a paragraph in prose.

## **Symbol**

Anything that is meant to represent or evoke something else, especially a concrete object meant to represent an intangible idea.

## **Synecdoche**

A specific type of metonymy in which a part of something is meant to signify the whole, or the whole is meant to stand for an individual part.

## **Syntax**

The way in which words are arranged in order to create meaning.

*In English, sentences typically follow a basic **syntax** of subject + verb + object. Adding other elements (like a complement or indirect object) or inverting the word order can create nuance or change the meaning. In the Star Wars films, for example, Yoda's **syntax** often follows an inverted structure: object + subject + verb.*

## **Tone**

In literature, the attitude of a writer, narrator, or speaker toward the subject matter, as expressed by style, word choice, or demeanor.

*Joseph Heller's Catch-22 tells the story of a U.S. Air Force squadron forced to fly dangerous bombing missions during World War II. Despite the serious subject matter, the narrator's humorous, ironic **tone** reveals Heller's disdain for the absurdity of war.*