English 12 Literary Terms

Allegory – a literary work with two or more levels of meaning – a literal level and one or more symbolic levels. The events, settings, objects, or characters in an allegory – the literal level – stand for ideas or qualities, such as goodness, tyranny, salvation, and so on. Common in Middle Ages. Ex Animal Farm

Alliteration – the repetition of initial consonant sounds in accented syllables. Especially in poetry, alliteration is used to emphasize and to link words, as well as to create musical sounds. Common in Anglo Saxon poetry. Ex “the fair breeze blew, the white foam flew”

Allusion – a reference to a well-known person, place, event, literary work, or work of art.

Ambiguity – the effect created when words suggest and support two or more divergent interpretations. Ambiguity may be used in literature to express experiences or truths that are complex or even contradictory.

Antagonist – A character who opposes the protagonist is called the antagonist.

Apostrophe – a punctuation mark used to mark omission of one or more letters, mark possessive cases, and mark plural of written items that are not words established in english

Ballad – a song that tells a story, often about adventure or romance, or a poem imitating such a song. Most ballads are divided into four or six line stanzas, are rhymed, use simple language, and depict dramatic action. Many ballads employ a repeated refrain. Some use incremental repetition, in which the refrain is varied slightly each time it appears.

Blank Verse – unrhymed poetry usually written in iambic pentameter. Occasional variations in rhythm are introduced in blank verse to create emphasis, variety, and naturalness of sound. Because blank verse sounds much like ordinary spoken English, it is often used in drama, as by Shakespeare, and in poetry.

Caesura – a natural pause in the middle of a line of poetry. In Anglo-Saxon poetry, a caesura divides each fore stress line in half and thus is essential to the rhythm.

Carpe Diem – a Latin phrase, carpe diem means “seize the day” or “make the most of passing time.” Many great literary works have been written with the carpe diem theme.

Character – a person (though not necessarily a human being) who takes part in the action of a literary work is known as a character. Characters can be classified in different ways. A character who plays an important role is called a major character. A character who does not is called a minor character. A round character has many aspects to his or her personality. A flat character is defined by only a few qualities. A character who changes is called dynamic; a character who does not change is called static.

Conceit – an unusual and surprising comparison between two very different things. This special kind of metaphor or complicated analogy is often the basis for a whole poem. During the Elizabethan Age, sonnets commonly included Petrarchan conceits. Petrarchan conceits make extravagant claims about the beloved’s beauty or the speaker’s suffering, with comparisons to divine beings, powerful natural forces, and objects that contain a given quality in the highest degree.

Couplet – a pair of rhyming lines written in the same meter. A heroic couplet is a rhymed pair of iambic pentameter lines. In a closed couplet, the meaning and grammar are completed within the two lines. Shakespearean sonnets usually end with heroic couplets.

Dramatic Irony – In dramatic irony, there is a contradiction between what a character thinks and what the reader or audience knows to be true.

Elegy – is a solemn and formal lyric poem about death. It may mourn a particular person or reflect on a serious or tragic theme, such as passing of youth or beauty

Epic – a long narrative poem about the adventures of gods or of a hero, Beowulf is a folk epic, one that was composed orally and passed from storyteller to storyteller. Epic conventions are traditional characteristics of epic poems, including an opening statement of the theme; an appeal for supernatural help in telling the story

Epic Hero –

Epigram – a brief statement in prose or in verse. The concluding couplet in an English sonnet may be epigrammatic. An essay may be written in an epigrammatic style.

Epitaph – an inscription written on a tomb or burial place. In literature, epitaphs include serious or humorous lines written as if intended for such use.

Exemplum – a moral anecdote, brief or extended, real or fictitious, used to illustrate a point

Foreshadowing – a literary device in which an author indistinctly suggests certain plot developments that might come later in the story

Hyperbole – a deliberate exaggeration or overstatement.

Iambic Pentameter – Meter is the rhythmical pattern of a poem. This pattern is determined by the number and types of stresses, or beats, in each line. Iambic pentameter: a foot with one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable, as in the word afraid.

Imagery – the descriptive language used in literature to re-create sensory experiences. Imagery enriches writing by making it more vivid, setting a tone, suggesting emotions, and guiding readers’ reactions.

Incremental Repetition –

In Media Res – a Latin phrase denoting the literary and artistic narrative technique wherein the relation of a story beings either at the mid-point or at the conclusion, rather than at the beginning, establishing setting, character, and conflict via flashback or expository conversations relating the pertinent past.

Irony – the general name given to literary techniques that involve surprising, interesting, or amusing contradictions. In verbal irony, words are used to suggest the opposite of their usual meaning. In irony of situation, an event occurs that directly contradicts expectations.

Kenning – a metaphorical phrase used in Anglo-Saxon poetry to replace a concrete noun.

Metaphor – a figure of speech in which one thing is spoken of as though it were something else, as in “death, that long sleep.” Through this identification of dissimilar things, a comparison is suggested or implied.

Octave – a verse form consisting of eight lines of iambic pentameter, the most common rhyme scheme for an octave is abba abba. An octave is the first part of a Petrarchan sonnet, which ends with a contrasting sestet.

Paradox – a statement that seems to be contradictory but that actually presents a truth. Because a paradox is surprising or even chocking, it draws the reader’s attention to what is being said.

Parody – a humorous imitation of another work or a type of work. For instance, Chaucer parodies the grand style of an epic poem in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” from The Canterbury Tales by applying that style to trivial incidents.

Pastoral – refers to literary works that deal with the pleasures of a simple rural life or with escape to a simpler place and time. During the European Renaissance, pastoral writing became quite popular.

Point of View – the perspective, or vantage point, from which a story is told is its point of view. If a character within the story narrates, then it is told from the first person point of view. If a voice from outside the story tells it, then the story is told from the third person point of view. If the knowledge of the storyteller is limited to the internal states of one character, then the storyteller has a limited point of view. If the storytellers knowledge extends to the internal states of all the characters, then the storyteller has an omniscient point of view.

Protagonist – A character who plays the central role in a story is called the protagonist.

Pun – a form of word play which suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar sounding words, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect.

Refrain – a regularly repeated line or group of lines in a poem or song.

Rhythm – the repetition of sounds at the ends of words. End rhyme occurs when rhyming words appear at the ends of lines. Internal rhyme occurs when rhyming words fall within a line. Exact rhyme is the use of identical rhyming sounds, as in love and dove. Approximate, or slant, rhyme is the use of sounds that are similar but not identical, as in prove or glove.

Romance – a story that presents remote or imaginative incidents rather than ordinary, realistic experience. The term romance was originally used to refer to medieval tales of the deeds and loves of noble knights and ladies. These early romances, or tales of chivalry and courtly love, as seen in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Satire – writing that ridicules or holds up to contempt the faults of individuals or groups. Although a satire is often humorous, its purpose is not simply to make readers laugh but also to correct the flaws and short comings that it points out.

Scansion – the process of analyzing the metrical pattern of a poem.

Sestet – the name given to the second division of an Italian sonnet, which must consist of an octave, of eight lines, succeeded by a sestet, of six lines.

Setting – the time and place of the action of a literary work. A setting can provide a backdrop for the action. It can be the force that the protagonist struggles against and thus the source of the central conflict. It can also be used to create an atmosphere. In many works, the setting symbolizes a point that the author wishes to emphasize.

Soliloquy – a long speech in a play or in a prose work made by a character who is alone and thus reveals private thoughts and feelings to the audience or reader.

Sonnet – a fourteen line lyric poem with a single theme. Sonnets are usually written in iambic pentameter. The Shakespearean, or English, sonnet has three four-line quatrains plus a concluding two-line couplet.

Symbol – a sign, word, phrase, image, or other object that stands for or represents something else.

Symbolism – the applied use of symbols. It is a representation that carries a particular meaning. It is a device in literature where an object represents an idea.

Synecdoche – a figure of speech in which a part of something is used to stand for the whole.

Theme – the central idea, concern, or purpose in a literary work. In an essay, the theme might be directly stated in what is known as a thesis statement. In a serious literary work, the theme is usually expressed indirectly rather than directly. A light work, one written strictly for entertainment, may not have a theme.

Tone – the writer’s attitude toward the readers and toward the subject. It may be formal or informal, friendly or distant, personal or pompous.

Tragedy – a type of drama or literature that shows the downfall or destruction of a noble or outstanding person, traditionally one who possesses a character weakness called a tragic flaw.

Tragic Hero – the tragic hero is caught up in a sequence of events that inevitably results in disaster.

Volta/turn – the shift or point of dramatic change. The term is most frequently used in discussion of sonnet form, in which the volta marks a shift in thought. It is most frequently encountered at the end of the octave, or the end of the twelfth line in Shakespearean sonnets.