LITERARY TERMS: VOCABULARY FOR THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

You should learn the following literary terms in order to be successful in the study of literature this year and throughout high school and college. You should be able to use these terms easily and correctly in discussions and in analytical essays.

- **allegory** – a narrative in which characters, action, and sometimes setting represent abstract concepts or moral qualities (Examples: "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Fall of the House of Usher")
- **alliteration** – the repetition of same or similar consonant sounds in words that are close together (Example: She sells seashells down by the seashore.)
- **allusion** – a seemingly brief reference to something in history, politics, literature, art, or music which the writer expects the reader to understand and relate to the work (Example: “Then Eden sank to grief”)
- **ambiguity** – the purposeful creation of a statement with more than one possible meaning. Authors employ ambiguity when they want to create room for a variety of interpretations. If used well, ambiguity can enrich writing, making it more complex.
- **American Dream** – a uniquely American vision created by a feeling of optimism and unlimited opportunity
- **antagonist** – the character that opposes the hero
- **aphorism** – a proverb or concise statement designed to make a point or illustrate a commonly held belief. (Example: “Spare the rod and spoil the child.”)
- **archetype** – the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based; a model or first form; prototype; epitome. Archetypes function as powerful symbols and examples. (Example: Jack the Ripper is an archetype of the serial killer.)
- **atmosphere** – the mood or prevailing feeling created in a literary work
- **ballad** – a simple poem which tells a tragic story, usually created for singing
- **bandwagon** – a faulty argument which claims that since everyone is doing, thinking, or saying something, you should too. (Example: All teenagers engage in underage drinking, so the legal drinking age should be lowered to 13.) Not all teenagers engage in underage drinking. Even if many do, their actions do not make drinking acceptable at a young age.
- **caricature** – exaggeration or distortion of a character’s physical, emotional, and moral characteristics, for the purpose of comic criticism. Many political cartoons rely on caricature.
- **carpe diem** – literally “seize the day” advises the reader to enjoy the present pleasures because of the brevity of life and finality of death
- **character** – an imaginary person in a literary work
  - **static character** – does not change in the course of the story
  - **dynamic character** – changes in some important way as a result of the story’s action
  - **flat character** – have few personality traits; they can be summed up by a single phrase (Example: the noisy neighbor)
  - **round character** – have more dimension to their personalities; they are complex, just as real people are
- **characterization** – the creation of believable fictitious personalities. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions.
- **cliché** – an overused phrase which has lost its freshness (Example: “Once and for all” or “Last but not least” or “In this day and age”)
- **colloquial** – informal language of a region, the vernacular. (For example, depending upon where in the United States you live, a large sandwich might be a hero, a sub, or a hoagie.)
- **composition (four types)**
- **narration** – tells about an event or a series of events. The chief purpose is to interest or entertain.
- **description** – pictures a scene, setting, or person.
- **argumentation or persuasion** – convinces a reader or hearer by establishing the truth or falsity of a proposition.
- **exposition** – explains the nature of an object, an idea, or a theme. Some methods of exposition are identification, definition, classification, illustration, comparison and contrast, and analysis.

- **comedy** – a play in which the complications are designed to amuse or interest the audience without evoking the deep sympathy of tragedy
- **confidant** – (feminine, confidante) a character in a novel or a drama who takes little part in the action but is a close friend of the main character and who receives the confidences and intimate thoughts of the main character
- **conflict** – the struggle between opposing forces in a story, usually resolved by the end of the work
  - **internal conflict** – involves opposing forces within a person’s mind
  - **external conflict** – exists between two people, between a person and a force of nature or a machine, or between a person and a whole society
- **connotation** – the implied meaning of a word or phrase; the associations which come to mind when a word is used that go beyond its dictionary meaning. Poets especially tend to use words rich in connotation. (Example: The word *house* has a different emotional effect on the reader than does the word *home*, with its connotation of safety, coziness, and security.)
- **crisis** – a significant action which changes inevitably the course of the literary work
- **denotation** – the literal (dictionary) meaning of a word or phrase
- **dialect** – a way of speaking that is characteristic of a certain group or of the inhabitants of a certain geographical area
- **dialogue** – the conversation of characters in a story
- **diction** – the choice or use of words in oral and written discourse. A work’s diction forms one of its centrally important literary elements, as writers use words to convey action, reveal character, imply attitudes, identify themes, and suggest values. The four literary levels:
  - **formal** (serious and formal books)
  - **informal** (relaxed and polite conversation of cultivated people)
  - **colloquial** (everyday, often regional, usage in a group but not necessarily universal. (Example: y’all)
  - **slang** (newly coined words which are not acceptable in formal usage)
- **didactic** – from the Greek, meaning “good teaching.” Writing or speech is didactic when it has an instructive purpose or lesson. (Example: Some of Aesop’s fables are didactic in that they contain an underlying moral or social message.)
- **drama** – the literary form designed for presentation in a theater by actors representing characters
- **epilogue** – the concluding statement to a composition
- **euphemism** – the use of a mild, delicate, inoffensive, or vague word or expression for one thought to be coarse, unpleasant, offensive, or blunt (Example: saying “passed away” instead of “died”)
- **fable** – a brief story, often including animals as characters, in which a moral is explicitly provided
- **fiction** – an imagined story, whether in prose, poetry, or drama
- **figurative language** – a form of language in which writers and speakers mean something other than the literal meaning of their words
- **flashback** – an interruption of a story's chronology to describe an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of the action. Writers use flashback to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time.
- **foil** – a character whose traits are the opposite of those of another character and who thus points up the strengths or weaknesses of another character
- **folk tale** – a narrative which has a humorous tone, stereotyped characters, and unbelievable events are ascribed to hearsay (Example: “The Devil and Tom Walker”)
• **foreshadowing** – implication (hint) by the author of events to come later in a literary work

• **frame story** – a story within a story  (Example: *Ethan Frome, Turn of the Screw, Wuthering Heights*)

• **free verse** — poetry that is characterized by varying line lengths, lack of traditional meter, and non-rhyming lines. (Examples: Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* uses free verse. The “To Be or Not to Be” soliloquy from *Hamlet* is an excellent example.)

• **genre** – categories into which literary works are grouped according to form, technique, or subject matter (5 genres of literature—short story, novel, essay, drama, and poetry)

• **hyperbole** – an exaggeration for the sake of emphasis and is not to be taken literally  (Examples: I have a million things to do today. She ate a mile-high ice cream cone. “When sorrows come, they come not single but in battalions.”)

• **idiom** – phrase or expression that means something different from what the words actually say  (Example: “Piece of cake,” Jerry said. “I can do that with no problem.” The phrase “piece of cake” actually means that it is extremely easy.)

• **imagery** – the use of vivid, concrete sensory details

• **in medias res** – a Latin term which means “into the middle of things.” It usually describes a narrative that begins, not at the beginning of a story but somewhere in the middle—usually at some crucial point in the action. (Example: “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”)

• **irony** – the contrast between what appears to be on the surface and what actually is
  o **verbal irony** – occurs when someone says one thing and means something else (Example: “It is easy to stop smoking. I’ve done it many times.”)
  o **situational irony** – occurs when the opposite of what the characters or reader expects happens  (Example: a deep sea diver drowning in a bathtub)
  o **dramatic irony** – occurs when an audience or reader knows some crucial piece of information that the characters do not know

• **jargon** – specialized or technical language of a trade, profession, or similar group. The computer industry has introduced much jargon into our vocabulary. (Examples: crash, blog, text, tweet)

• **juxtaposition** — the placing of two items next to or near each other to create a certain effect, to reveal an attitude, or to accomplish some purpose of the writer. Note the following quotation from Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, “With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” King juxtaposes the two italicized phrases to emphasize that if his dream of brotherhood were to be achieved, the nation’s racial division would be eradicated.

• **litotes** – an understatement which is achieved by saying less than one means  (Example: Jeff looked at his loaded dinner plate and said, “This looks like a good bite.”)

• **local color/local colorists** – the emphasis in fiction on the dialect, dress, customs, and traditions of a particular region of the country (Examples of local colorists: Bret Harte and Mark Twain)

• **malapropism** – the act or habit of misusing words to comic effect. This usually results from ignorance or from confusion of words similar in sound but different in meaning, mainly polysyllabic words.

• **melodrama** – a literary work based on a romantic plot and developed sensationaly, with little regard for convincing motivation and with a constant appeal to the emotions of the audience

• **metaphor** – a figure of speech involving an implied comparison between two essentially unlike things in order to give the characteristics of one to the other  (Example: “You are the sunshine of my life.”)
  o **mixed metaphor** – a metaphor that does not make a logical comparison  (Example: “The President is a lame duck who is running out of gas.”)
  o **conceit** – a complex metaphor (“Housewifery” by Edward Taylor)

• **mood** – the atmosphere or predominant emotion in a literary work

• **motif** – a central theme or idea

• **motivation** – a circumstance or set of circumstances that prompts a character to act in a certain way or that determines
the outcome of a situation or literary work

- **novel** – a long prose fiction which represents humans in significant action in their world
- **novella** – a short novel  (Example: *The Old Man and the Sea*)
- **onomatopoeia** – words which imitate sounds (Examples: bang, pop, snap, zap, crunch, smacked)
- **oxymoron** – a figure of speech that combines opposite or contradictory ideas or terms  (Examples: jumbo shrimp, wise fool, pretty ugly, silent scream)
- **parable** – a story which teaches a lesson
- **paradox** – a statement or situation that seems contradictory or mistaken on the surface, yet turns out to make sense when carefully examined (Example: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”)
- **parody** – a literary work that imitates either the style or subject matter of another author for the purposes of ridicule or criticism. Parodies often achieve their effects by humorously exaggerating certain features in the original work. (Example: *Lord of the Flies* is a parody of *Coral Island*.)
- **parallel structure** — the use of similar forms in writing for nouns, verbs, phrases, or thoughts. (For example, “Jane likes reading, writing, and skiing.”) Good writers rely on parallel structure to maintain balance and symmetry.
- **pathetic fallacy** – crediting nature with emotions of human beings
- **pathos** – the quality in art and literature which stimulates pity, tenderness, or sorrow in the reader or viewer
- **pattern** – any significant recurrences within a literary work
- **persona** – the mask which covers the direct voice of the author. Persona may be the narrator of the story or may be a voice in a story which is not “directly” the author's voice but which is created by the author in order to allow the author to speak indirectly through this masking persona
- **personification** – the giving of human characteristics to something which is essentially non-human (Example: America has thrown her hat into the ring and will be joining forces with the British.)
- **plagiarism** – literary theft, which is the taking or closely imitating of the language and thoughts of another author and representing them as one's own
- **plot** – the progression of events in a literary work
  - **Five Stages of Plot:**
    - **exposition** – opening information in a literary work; usually provides background information, establishes the setting, and introduces the characters
    - **rising action** – a set of conflicts and crises which lead up to the climax
    - **climax** – the turning point or highest peak of the action in the plot
    - **falling action** – the action following the climax
    - **resolution (or denouement da noo man)’** – the final unraveling of the plot, solution of mystery, explanation or outcome, or untying of the knot of intrigue
- **poetic license** – a liberty taken by a writer to produce a desired effect by deviating from conventional form, established rule, fact, or logic
- **points of view** – the angle or vision from which a story is narrated.
  - **first person** – one of the characters in the story tells the story, using first-person pronouns such as *I or we*  (A first person narrator may be a character or an observer.)
  - **first person objective** – the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader
  - **third person (objective)** – the narrator is a detached observer who reports on events so that the reader can supply the meaning
    - **omniscient** – an all-knowing narrator tells the story, using third person pronouns. The narrator knows everything about the characters.
- **prologue** – the preface or introduction to a literary work
- **prose** – the normal pattern of speech and writing (any writing other than poetry)
• **protagonist** – the main character in a literary work, who may or may not be heroic; the character the story revolves around

• **pseudonym** – penname (Example: Mark Twain = Samuel Langhorne Clemens)

• **pun** – a play on words or the humorous use of a word emphasizing a different meaning or application (Example: Remember the famous pun uttered by Mercutio as he is dying in *Romeo and Juliet*: “Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man.”)

• **sarcasm** – the use of verbal irony in which a person appears to be praising something but is actually insulting it (Example: As I fell down the stairs headfirst, I heard Mary say, “Look at that coordination.”)

• **satire** – a work which combines humor with criticism in order to improve society or humanity

• **science fiction** – a kind of fantasy which tends to deal chiefly with events that take place in the future or on other planets and employs physical and scientific principles not yet discovered or proven but distinctly possible

• **setting** – the time and place that the action occurs

• **simile** – direct comparison of one thing with another, announced by the words “like” or “as” (Example: “What happens to a dream deferred, does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?”)

• **stream of consciousness** – a style of writing that portrays the inner (and often chaotic) working of a character’s mind (Example: In “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,” Granny’s rambling thoughts reveal events in her life as she dies.)

• **suspense** – the poised anticipation of the reader or audience as to the outcome of the events of a short story, a novel, or a drama

• **style** – the way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences and dialogue, and develops ideas and action with description and summary by means of imagery and other literary techniques

• **symbol/symbolism** – something relatively concrete, such as an object, action, character or scene, which signifies something relatively abstract, such as a concept or an idea

• **syntax** – The arrangement of words to form phrases, clauses and sentences; sentence construction. Also, syntax is both the patterns of the aforementioned arrangements and the function of a word, phrase, or clause within a sentence. In the following example from Frost’s “Stopping by Woods,” normal syntax (subject, verb, complement) is inverted: “Whose woods these are I think I know.”

• **tall tale** – an exaggerated narrative about a folk hero. The hero may be entirely fictitious. (Examples: Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan)

• **theme** – the main idea of a literary work; an author’s insight about life.

• **tone** – the writer's or speaker's implied attitude toward his subject, characters, and audience, and sometimes toward himself

• **tragedy** – in its most general sense, a term referring to any narrative writing in which the protagonist suffers disaster after a serious and significant struggle, but faces his downfall in such a way as to attain heroic stature (in its more restricted sense tragedy refers to a play of this nature)

• **tragic flaw** – a weakness or limitation of character, resulting in a fall of the tragic hero. (Example: Julius Caesar’s tragic flaws were his ambition and his arrogance.)

• **universal theme** – a theme that applies to any time period and any group of people

• **voice** – An author’s distinctive literary style, basic vision and general attitude toward the world. This “voice” is revealed through an author’s use of syntax (sentence construction); diction (distinctive vocabulary); punctuation; characterization and dialogue. All communication has voice of some kind. Voice is the expression of personality, the fingerprint of creativity. (It’s what makes us say, “I’ll bet this story is by Edgar Allan Poe.”) The voice of an author may cover a wide range of possibilities (e.g. victim, judge, friend, coach, spy, opponent, advocate, critic).
• **volta** -- a turn or a sudden change in thought, direction, or emotion. (Also, one of the four characteristics of sonnets. The other three characteristics are 14 lines, iambic pentameter, and a rhyme scheme.)