

VOCABULARY FOR LITERARY ANALYSIS

When you're discussing CHARACTERIZATION, you might use the following terms:

major character: one who figures prominently in the story.

minor character: one who is not crucial to the story.

protagonist: the chief character (male or female) in a play, story, or film.

antagonist: the character (male or female) in fiction or drama who stands directly opposed to the protagonist.

foil: a character who makes a contrast with another and thus underscores or enhances the characteristics of another.

well rounded character: a many-sided character, one who does not always act predictably.

flat character: a one-dimensional character, one who never evolves.

stereotype: a character who is oversimplified, who lacks individualizing characteristics.

tragic flaw: a supposed weakness in the tragic protagonist. A character may have a "tragic flaw"--an imperfection that will lead to his/her ruin and is "tragic" because the character is either not aware of it or can do nothing to correct it.

conflict: a struggle between the character and some other force such as another character. The conflict can be an internal struggle.

motivation: reasons for a character's actions.

When evaluating an author's characterization, the characters may be

- poorly developed/unrealistic/simplistic/trite/hackneyed
- carefully delineated/compelling/intriguing/complex/revealing/multi-faceted/richly-developed

An author establishes/portrays/depicts/develops/employs a character

When you're discussing PLOT, you might use the following key terms:

foreshadowing: the presentation of information and events in such a way that the reader is prepared for what is to come.

exposition: in fiction and drama, introductory material introducing characters and the situation.

rising action: events that lead up to the climax.

climax: point of highest interest. In dramatic structure, climax is the turning point in the action.

falling action: follows the climax and is the resolution of the plot.

dénouement: the resolution or outcome of a plot.

When evaluating an author's plot, it may be

- original/intriguing/complex/plausible/ingenious
- mundane/formulaic/predictable/simplistic/far-fetched

When you're discussing POINT OF VIEW, you might use the following key terms:

fly-on-the-wall narrator: a narrator who only reports what is said and done, never editorializes.

innocent eye narrator: a naive narrator; the audience sees more than the narrator.

omniscient narrator: a speaker who knows the thoughts of all the characters.

selectively omniscient narrator: a speaker who knows the thoughts of one character and for the most part sees the other characters only from the outside.

third-person narrator: a speaker who does not participate in the story.

unreliable narrator: a speaker whose comments a reader cannot trust.

When discussing point of view, the author may employ/adopt/use a _____ narrator or _____ type of narration.

A particular point of view conveys/enables/allows/underscores/complicates/intensifies/underscores.

When you're discussing STYLE, you might refer to an author's use of

alliteration: the repetition of initial identical consonant sounds or any vowel sounds in successive or closely associated words or syllables.

analogy: a comparison of two things, alike in certain aspects. A simile is an expressed analogy and a metaphor an implied one.

anthropomorphism: the ascription to animals or inanimate objects of human forms, emotions, or characteristics.

aphorism: a concise statement of a principle or precept given in pointed words.

apostrophe: addressing a person not present.

diction: the choice of vocabulary and sentence structure. A writer who speaks informally has used low diction whereas a formal work has high diction.

hyperbole: overstatement.

imagery: the means by which authors reach directly into the experience and imagination of their readers to create a desired response. Imagery works by way of analogy, i.e. "This is like that."

irony: presenting a contrast of some sort. Verbal irony is a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is expressed. Dramatic irony occurs when a character's words or acts may carry a meaning unperceived by the character but understood by the audience.

metaphor: an implied analogy which identifies one object with another.

personification: speaking of an inanimate object or an abstract concept as though it were endowed with life or human attributes or feelings.

simile: a comparison between two distinctly different things indicated by the word "like" or "as."

stream of consciousness: depiction of an uninterrupted flow of thought.

symbolism: using objects or events to signify something beyond themselves.

tone: the prevailing attitude of a piece--a melancholy tone, an exuberant tone, a flat tone, etc.

When you're discussing LITERARY FORMS, you would ascribe the following terms to a piece

depending on its structure:

ballad: a fairly short narrative poem written in a songlike stanzaic form.

drama of the absurd: a type of drama, allied to comedy, that emphasizes the absurdity, emptiness, or meaninglessness of life.

epic: in its standard sense, the term epic or heroic poem is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long narrative poem on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race.

fable: a short story, often featuring animals with human traits, to which writers and editors attach “morals” or explanations.

haiku: a three-line poem, Japanese in origin.

melodrama: related to tragedy, but featuring sensational incidents, emphasizing plot at the expense of characterization.

parody: imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and applies the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject.

satire: the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation.

sonnet: a fixed form of fourteen lines, normally iambic pentameter. Rhyme scheme can be either Shakespearian (English) or Petrarchan (Italian).

Vocabulary for Literary Analysis was developed by Denise Ronan and Nancy Wilson, 1998.

For more assistance with understanding literary terms and literary analysis, or with any stage of the writing process, visit The Writing Center or call us to make an appointment.



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