

English Handbook of Literary Terms

The print version of this handbook is distributed to all CCHS students in ninth grade. It is designed to be a companion for all English courses at CCHS, beginning with freshman year as students are introduced to the various literary genres.

Fiction

Character

CHARACTER: A person (sometimes a group of people, an animal, or a physical force) invented by an author who has an impact on the outcome of the story. Character motivation must be consistent; the character must be convincing and lifelike.

PROTAGONIST: the hero, chief character, or force in the work which the reader wants to succeed

ANTAGONIST: a force or character opposing the protagonist who tries to stop the protagonist from reaching his desired goal

FOIL: a character who serves by contrast to emphasize the qualities of another character

Conflict

CONFLICT: The relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist. The conflict can be threefold: 1) conflict between individuals, 2) between the character and circumstances intervening between him and a goal he has set himself, and 3) conflict of opposing tendencies within a single individual's mind.

There are five basic types of conflict:

- **MAN vs. MAN:** One character in the story has a problem with one or more of the other characters.
- **MAN vs. SOCIETY:** A character has a conflict or problem with some element of society—the school, the law, the accepted way of doing things, and so on.
- **MAN vs. HIMSELF:** A character has trouble deciding what to do in a particular situation.
- **MAN vs. NATURE:** A character has a problem with some natural happening: a snowstorm, an avalanche, the bitter cold, or any of the other elements common to nature.
- **MAN vs. FATE:** A character has to battle what seems to be an uncontrollable problem. Whenever the problem seems to be a strange or unbelievable coincidence, fate can be considered the cause of the conflict.

PLOT

UNITY OF ACTION: The plot has unity if it is a single, complete, and ordered action in which none of the parts is unnecessary. The parts are so closely connected that without one of the parts the work would be disjointed.

PLOT is a system of actions in a purposeful sequence represented in a work. Aristotle defines plot as that which has a beginning, middle, and an end.

EXPOSITION: background information on the characters, setting, and situation, usually found at the beginning of a story

RISING ACTION: begins when the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist is set in motion and ends with the climax

CLIMAX: the turning point or moment of highest intensity in the work when either the protagonist or antagonist must succeed

FALLING ACTION (DENOUEMENT): the action which works out the decision made in the climax—the story unravels

RESOLUTION: the portion of the play or story where the problem is solved, providing closure

SUSPENSE: an anxious uncertainty about what is going to happen to characters with whom the reader has established bonds of sympathy

SURPRISE: Surprise occurs when the events that occur in a literary work violate the expectations we have formed. The interplay between suspense and surprise is a prime source of the power of plot

INTRIGUE: a scheme set up by a character which depends for its success on the ignorance of the person(s) against whom it is directed

FLASHBACK: The writer interrupts the chronological sequence of a story to relate an incident which occurred prior to the beginning of the story.

FORESHADOWING: A writer's use of hints or clues to indicate events that will occur later in the story. The use of this technique both creates suspense and prepares the reader for what is to come.

Technique

TONE is the author's attitude toward his subject matter. The tone might be solemn, formal, playful, or serious; it is created through word choice and sentence structure.

MOOD: It is the feeling a piece of literature evokes in the reader. happy, sad, peaceful, etc.

ATMOSPHERE: Created by the tone pervading the literary work, atmosphere shapes the reader's expectations about the plot (whether the events will be happy, sad, disastrous, etc.).

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS: a style of writing in which the thoughts and feelings of the writer are recorded as they occur

VERISIMILITUDE: an illusion of reality created in a fictional work

Point of View

POINT OF VIEW is the outlook from which the events in a work are told.

The methods of narration are:

OMNISCIENT NARRATOR: The third person narrator is all-knowing and relates the thoughts, feelings and motivations of all the characters.

LIMITED OMNISCIENT NARRATOR: The third person narrator relates the thoughts and feelings of only one character.

FIRST PERSON NARRATOR: A character, often the protagonist, narrates the story in the first person.

OBJECTIVE NARRATOR (detached observer): The third person narrator sees and records the information from a neutral or unemotional viewpoint.

Setting

SETTING: the time and place in which the action of a literary work occurs

LOCAL COLOR: the use of details which are characteristic of a certain region or section of the country

Theme

THEME: It is a statement about life or universal truth that a particular work is trying to get across to the reader. In stories written for children, the theme is often spelled out clearly at the end when the author says "...and so, the moral of the story is "

In more complex literature, the theme may not be so moralistic in tone, or at least not so clearly spelled out.

MOTIF: It is a term for an often-repeated character, incident, idea or image in literature that is used to convey themes.

AMBIGUITY: the deliberate use of a word or expression to convey two or more diverse attitudes or feelings

Nonfiction

NONFICTION is a form of writing that is based on fact and reality; it is not created in the mind of the writer.

Content

TRUTH is that which conforms to fact and reality. Truth may be either objective or subjective depending upon the person's point of view.

OBJECTIVE TRUTH: The author presents situations or the characters' thoughts, feelings, and actions in a detached, noncommittal manner.

SUBJECTIVE TRUTH: The author incorporates personal experiences into his writing or projects into the narrative his personal disposition, judgments, values, and feelings.

BIAS: Bias occurs when an author prejudices the audience in favor of one side of an issue by not covering the topic fairly. Bias should be avoided in nonfiction writing.

THEME: the idea, universal truth, or commentary on life or people emphasized by a literary work

Technique

EXPOSITION: writing intended to make clear or explain something which might otherwise be difficult to understand

POINT OF VIEW: relative position or angle from which a thing is seen or a question is considered

TONE: the feeling conveyed by the author's attitude toward his subject and by the particular way in which he writes about it

VOICE: a term used in a discussion of style to identify the person or personality speaking in a literary work

ANALOGY: a comparison of two or more similar objects which suggests that if they are alike in certain respects, they will probably be alike in other ways as well

GENERALIZATION: a general principle or conclusion which is drawn from an examination of details

Types of Nonfiction

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: an account of a person's life written by himself

BIOGRAPHY: an account of a person's life written by someone else

DIARY: a personal, daily account of an individual's experiences and feelings

DOCUMENTARY: an authoritative and artistic (usually film) presentation which depicts the facts about an event or social, historical or cultural phenomenon

ESSAY: a fairly short nonfiction selection in which the author expresses his thoughts and feelings on any subject he chooses to discuss

FORMAL ESSAY: a relatively impersonal essay in which the author writes as an authority and expounds on the subject in an orderly way

PERSONAL ESSAY: the author assumes a tone of intimacy with his audience, tends to deal with everyday things rather than with public affairs or specialized topics, and writes in a relaxed, self-revelatory, and often whimsical fashion

HISTORY: a recording of past events, persons and places

JOURNAL: a record of experiences, ideas, or reflections kept regularly for private use

JOURNALISM records and presents topics of current interest to the public through news media; journalists present facts and describe situations without attempting to interpret them.

NEWS STORY: It is a factual recording of current events, persons and places and appears in the newspaper or magazine; it answers the questions, "Who? What? When? Why? Where? How?"

EDITORIAL: an article in a newspaper or magazine that gives the editor's or author's point of view.

MEMOIR: Taken from a private diary or journal, it is the day-to-day record of events in a person's life, written for personal use and pleasure. It tells of the people and events that the author has known or witnessed.

Poetry

POETRY is a patterned form of verbal or written expression of ideas in concentrated, imaginative and rhythmical terms. Poetry often contains rhyme and a specific meter, but not necessarily.

Key Terminology

CONCRETE: a concrete word refers to an object that can be heard, seen, felt, tasted, or smelled

ABSTRACT: a word or phrase that refers to an idea rather than a concrete object or thing

DENOTATION: the literal or dictionary meaning of a word

CONNOTATION: all the emotions or feelings associated with a word

IMAGERY: words or phrases which create a certain picture in the reader's mind

TONE: The author's attitude toward his audience and characters: serious, humorous, satiric, etc.

MOOD: The feeling a piece of literature evokes in the reader. happy, sad, peaceful, etc.

INVERSION: 1. a reversal of the normal word order of a sentence; 2. in verse, a reverse in the metrical pattern

REPETITION: reiterating a word or phrase within a poem

REFRAIN: the repetition of one or more phrases or lines at intervals in a poem, usually at the end of a stanza

Sounds

EUPHONY: language which seems to the ear to be smooth, pleasant, and musical

CACOPHONY: language which seems to the ear to be harsh, rough, and unmusical

ALLITERATION: the repetition of the initial letter or sound in two or more words in a line of verse

ASSONANCE: the similarity or repetition of a vowel sound in two or more words in a line of verse

CONSONANCE: It is the repetition of consonant sounds within a line of verse. Consonance is similar to alliteration except consonance does not limit the repeated sound to the initial letter of a word; the repetition generally occurs at the ends of syllables.

Stanza

STANZA: a division of a poem based on thought or form

COUPLET: two lines of verse that rhyme

HEROIC COUPLET: iambic pentameter with end rhyme

CLOSED COUPLET: two lines that form a complete unit of thought

TRIPLER: three-line stanza

QUATRAIN: four-line stanza

SPENSERIAN STANZA: nine-line stanza (first eight in iambic pentameter and the last in iambic hexameter) which rhymes ababbcbcc

RIME ROYAL: seven-line stanza, in iambic pentameter, which rhymes ababbcc

OTTAVA RIMA: eight-line stanza, in iambic pentameter, which rhymes abababcc

TERZA RIMA: consists of linked groups of three rhymes in the following pattern: aba bcb cdc ded

Rhymes

RHYME: The similarity of sound existing between two words.

RHYME SCHEME: It is a pattern in end rhyme; the first sound is represented with an "a," the second sound with a "b," etc.

END RHYME: Similar sounds which occur at the end of two or more lines of verse.

INTERNAL RHYME: Similar sounds which occur between two or more words in the same line of verse (usually at the middle and end of the line).

PERFECT RHYME: repetition of two or more words with the same accented vowel sound and all succeeding sounds.

IDENTICAL RHYME: repetition of two or more words with the same accented vowel sound, preceding consonant sound, and all succeeding sounds.

APPROXIMATE RHYME (SLANT RHYME): two words that have some sounds in common but not enough to make them a perfect rhyme; often the words are spelled the same but pronounced differently.

DOUBLE RHYME: occurs when the last two syllables of a word rhyme with another word.

TRIPLE RHYME: occurs when the last three syllables of a word or line rhyme.

ALTERNATING RHYME: a rhyme scheme in which the last word in every other line rhymes.

Punctuation of Line

END-STOPPED LINE: punctuation at the end of a line

ENJAMBMENT (RUN-ON LINE): poetic “sentence” which flows over more than one line

CAESURA: Punctuation or a phrasal pause in the middle of a line

Types of Verse

RHYMED VERSE: lines with end rhyme and regular meter

BLANK VERSE: lines of iambic pentameter without end rhyme

FREE VERSE: lines with no rhyme or regular meter

Meter

METER: The pattern of stressed (accented) and unstressed (unaccented) syllables established in a line of poetry.

TYPES OF METRICAL FEET:

- IAMBIC FOOT (u /): two syllable foot—unstressed, stressed
- TROCHAIC FOOT (/ u): two syllable foot—stressed, unstressed
- ANAPESTIC FOOT (u u /): three syllables—two unstressed and one stressed
- DACTYLIC FOOT (/ u u): three syllables—one stressed and two unstressed
- SPONDAIC FOOT (/ /): two syllables—both stressed

KINDS OF METRICAL LINES:

- monometer. one-foot line
- dimeter. two-foot line
- trimeter. three-foot line

- tetrameter. four-foot line
- pentameter. five-foot line
- hexameter. six-foot line
- heptameter: seven-foot line
- octometer. eight-foot line

KEY: u = unstressed / = stressed

Figures of Speech

FIGURE OF SPEECH: An expression in which the words are used in a non-literal sense to present a figure, picture or image.

ALLUSION: a reference to some person, place or event that has literary, historical or geographical significance.

ANTITHESIS: opposing words or ideas written in grammatical parallels

APOSTROPHE: addressing someone (dead) or something (an idea), not present, as though present

CONCEIT: a far-fetched and ingenious comparison between two unlike things

HYPERBOLE (OVERSTATEMENT): an exaggeration for the sake of emphasis which is not to be taken literally

LITOTES: an understatement conveyed by stating the opposite of what one means or by stating a fact in the negative

METAPHOR: An implied comparison between two usually unrelated things that suggests one thing is the other; a linking verb is often used to connect the ideas.

METONYMY: the substitution of a word naming an object for another word closely associated with it

ONOMATOPOEIA: the use of a word to represent or imitate natural sounds

PARADOX: a statement, often metaphorical, that seems to be self-contradictory but has valid meaning

PERSONIFICATION: the giving of human characteristics to inanimate objects, ideas or animals.

PUN: a play on words that are identical or similar but have diverse meanings

SIMILE: a direct comparison between two usually unrelated things using “like” or “as”

OXYMORON: a type of paradox in which two linked words contradict each other (e.g., “jumbo shrimp”)

SYMBOL: a word or image that signifies something other than what is literally represented; it has both a literal and figurative meaning.

SYNECDOCHE: a substitution in which a part is used to represent the whole

UNDERSTATEMENT: saying less than one means or saying what one means with less force than the occasion warrants.

Kinds of Poems

BALLAD: a narrative poem which tells a story, frequently in four-line stanzas

FOLK: a sung ballad of unknown origin which is part of oral tradition

LITERARY: a ballad by a known author who imitates the folk ballad style

ELEGY: a poem that deals with the subject of death

FABLE: a short tale that teaches a moral lesson in which the characters are usually (but not always) animals with human qualities and speech.

LYRIC: any short, musical poem which expresses the poet’s clearly revealed thoughts and feelings

ODE: a lyric poem written in an elevated tone about a serious topic

PASTORAL: a poem that idealizes rural living and nature

FIXED FORM: a traditional pattern that applies to a whole poem

HAIKU: It is a three-line Japanese poem, usually about nature. The first line has five syllables, the second has seven syllables, and the third line has five syllables.

LIMERICK: a five-line nonsense poem with anapestic meter

SESTINA: A sestina is composed of six six-line stanzas followed by a tercet (three-line stanza). The end words used in each line of the first stanza repeat in a rolling pattern in the following stanzas; these same words are used two-to-a-line in the tercet.

ELIZABETHAN SONNET (ENGLISH OR SHAKESPEAREAN):

- structure: fourteen lines. iambic pentameter
- three quatrains, one couplet
- rhyme scheme: ababdcdefefgg

Usually, a question or theme is posed in the quatrains and answered or resolved in the couplet.

ITALIAN SONNET (PETRARCHAN):

- structure: fourteen lines, iambic pentameter
- octave and sestet
- rhyme scheme: abbaabbacdc dcd or abbaabbacdecde Often a question is raised in the octave and answered in the sestet.

VILLANELLE: It consists of five tercets and a quatrain rhyming “aba” (with a variation in the quatrain). The first and third lines of the first tercet alternate as the final lines of the other stanzas; these lines are again repeated as the final two lines of the poem.

Drama

DRAMA:

1. a form of literature consisting of plays
2. a serious play which focuses on the main character’s relationship to society rather than on some tragic flaw in his personality.

ACT : An act is a major division of the action of a play. Earlier plays were frequently divided into five acts. Modern plays are commonly divided into three acts.

SCENE: Within acts, another division frequently occurs when there is a change of time or setting. These divisions are called scenes.

Elements of Drama

THREE UNITIES: unity of action, unity of place, and unity of time

PLOT: The system of action organized in terms of the play’s beginning, middle and end.

DIALOGUE: It is a conversation between two or more characters in a play. Dialogue is the playwright's principal means of expression. It serves many functions.

- It imparts information.
- It reveals character.
- It directs attention to important plot elements.
- It highlights conflict and complications.
- It prepares for future happenings.
- It builds suspense.
- It reveals themes and ideas of the play.
- It establishes the tone—comic, serious, farcical or tragic.

OBSTACLES: something—physical, emotional, or mental—which is difficult to overcome

Conventions

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE: A single character's speech that indirectly reveals his thoughts to the audience but not to other characters.

INTERNAL MONOLOGUE: a technique that reproduces the rhythm of consciousness just as it occurs in a character's mind.

SOLILOQUY: a speech delivered by a character when he is alone on stage

ASIDE: a stage device in which the character expresses his thoughts or intentions in a short speech which, by convention, is inaudible to the other characters on the stage

DRAMATIC IRONY: It occurs when the audience sees a character's mistakes or misunderstandings that the character himself is unable to see.

COMIC RELIEF: the introduction of comic characters, speeches, or scenes into a serious or tragic work to reduce tension

STOCK CHARACTER: character types that recur repeatedly in a particular literary genre and are recognizable as conventions

STOCK SITUATION: often-used incidents or sequences of actions

CARICATURE: a picture or imitation of a person's features or mannerisms which is exaggerated to be comic or absurd

PATHOS: a scene designed to evoke the feelings of tenderness, pity, or sympathetic sorrow from the audience

TRAGIC HERO: A tragic hero is a character who experiences an inner struggle because of some character flaw. The struggle ends in the hero's defeat

BATHOS: While striving to be passionate as in pathos, the writer overshoots the mark and drops into the trivial or the ridiculous.

Types of Drama

COMEDY: Comedy is literature that presents life situations in a light, humorous, or satiric manner. In comedy, human errors or problems appear funny.

FARCE: It is a type of comedy designed to produce a “belly laugh”; to accomplish this, the writer uses exaggerated characters, places them in improbable situations, and makes wide use of verbal humor and physical horseplay.

MELODRAMA: It is an exaggerated, sensational form of drama that is intended to appeal to the audience’s emotions (e.g., soap operas).

PARODY: a literary form which is intended to mock a particular literary work or its style

ROMANCE: It is a form of literature that presents life as we would like it to be rather than as it actually is; generally romance deals with adventure, love, and excitement.

SATIRE: a literary tone and technique used to ridicule human vice or weakness

SLAPSTICK: a form of low comedy which makes its appeal through the use of violent and exaggerated physical actions

TRAGEDY: a literary work in which the hero is destroyed by some flaw within his character and by forces which he cannot control

TRAGICOMEDY: It was a type of drama that mingled the standard subject matter of both tragedy and comedy; occasionally these plays had double plots: one serious and the other comic.

Medieval Drama

MIRACLE (MYSTERY) PLAYS: These plays depicted either stories from Scripture (Old and New Testament) or the life of a saint. Initially brief dramatizations were used as part of liturgical services, but later these developed into complete plays. In the 14th century, cycles of plays depicting crucial Biblical events were performed on “pageant wagons.”

MORALITY PLAYS: These plays were dramatized allegories of the Christian quest for salvation. The protagonist represented mankind or “everyman”; the other characters included personifications of virtue and death as well as angels and demons who battled for man’s soul.

INTERLUDES: short stage entertainments, including secular farces and witty dialogues with a religious or political point

Greek Drama

DIONYSUS: god of wine and fertility

DIONYSIAN FESTIVAL: Tragedies were originally written and performed for Dionysus' festival which celebrated the coming of spring.

TETRALOGY: Beginning in the 5th century B.C., a playwriting competition would take place at the Dionysian festival. Three authors would each compose a tetralogy—three tragedies and a satyr play.

HUBRIS: character flaw of pride

PERIPETY: reversal of fortune

ANAGNORISIS: a discovery that often leads to a reversal in fortune

CATHARSIS: It is a purging of emotion that occurs at the end of a tragedy as the audience feels pity and fear for the tragic hero; it is supposed to inspire the audience members to lead better lives.

CHORUS: This group, which sings the odes in the Greek plays, serves as a narrator to comment on the action from the perspective of the common man. Originally the chorus consisted of 12 men; Sophocles expanded it to 15, including the choragos (the chorus leader who interacts directly with other actors).

STROPHE AND ANTISTROPHE: verses that correspond with the chorus' movement as it moves first in one direction and then in the other

EMMELEIA: the slow, stately dance of the chorus

PARTS OF THE GREEK PLAY:

- Prologue: introduced the action of the play
- Parados: song that introduced the chorus
- Episodion: a passage of dialogue between the characters and the choragos
- Stasimon: song by the chorus which alternated with the episodion
- Exodus: departure of the chorus and end of the play

Style and Language

MAXIM: a statement of general truth

APHORISM: a pithy statement of a general opinion or truth.

EPITHET: a word or phrase used in place of a person's name which is characteristic of that person

EPIGRAM: a brief, witty poem or saying that often deals with its subject in a satirical manner.

EUPHEMISM: the replacement of a blunt, often unpleasant, term with a more vague and roundabout expression.

CLICHE: a word or phrase which is so overused that it is no longer effective in most writing situations

EPITAPH: a short poem or verse written in memory of someone.

PLATITUDE: a trite remark

SYNTAX: the study of the way in which sequences of words are ordered into phrases, clauses, and sentences.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE:

- **LOOSE SENTENCE:** a sentence which expresses the main thought near the beginning and adds explanatory material as needed
- **BALANCED SENTENCE:** a sentence constructed to emphasize a similarity or contrast between two or more of its parts (words, phrases, or clauses)
- **PERIODIC SENTENCE:** a sentence which postpones the crucial or most surprising idea until the end
- **CUMULATIVE SENTENCE:** a sentence that places the general idea in the main clause and gives it greater precision with modifying words, phrases, or clauses placed before, after, or in the middle of the main clause.
- **PARALLEL SENTENCE:** a sentence in which similar words or ideas are phrased in a similar structure to emphasize the connection between them

Types of Languages

MALAPROPISM: a play on words that results when two words become jumbled in the speaker's mind.

JOURNALESE: the terse, factual style characteristic of journalists

ANACHRONISM: an error in chronology (such as placing a person or event outside its historical era)

BOMBAST: verbose and inflated diction that is disproportionate to the subject matter

DIDACTIC: writing intended to instruct and inform the reader (often about a moral message)

CIRCUMLOCUTION: the use of an excessive number of words to express an idea

DOUBLESPEAK: language that appears to be earnest and meaningful but in fact is a mixture of sense and nonsense

STYLE is a writer's characteristic manner of expression in prose or verse. Style is shaped by the writer's diction, figures of speech, rhythmic patterns, and sentence structure.

DICTION: the author's choice of words based on their correctness, clearness, or effectiveness

ARCHAISM: words that are old-fashioned and no longer sound natural when used.

COLLOQUIALISM: an expression that is usually accepted in informal writing or speaking but not in a formal situation.

JARGON (technical diction): the specialized language used by a specific group

SLANG: language used by a particular group of people among themselves or language used in fiction and special writing situations to lend color and feeling

TRITE: expressions which lack depth or originality, are overworked, or are not worth mentioning in the first place

FORMAL DICTION: word choice appropriate for formal writing like analytical essays, speeches, and business letters

INFORMAL DICTION: word choice appropriate for personal letters or casual conversations between acquaintances

Style

ATMOSPHERE: The mood pervading a literary work that sets up the reader's expectations as to the course of events, whether happy or disastrous.

MOOD: It is the feeling a piece of literature evokes in the reader. happy, sad, peaceful, etc.

STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUSNESS: a style of writing in which the thoughts and feelings of the writer are recorded as they occur

BLANK VERSE: unrhymed poetry written in iambic pentameter [a line consisting of five iambic feet (u /)]