Drama terms

Act
A major division in the action of a play. The ends of acts are typically indicated by lowering the curtain or turning up the houselights. Playwrights frequently employ acts to accommodate changes in time, setting, characters onstage, or mood. In many full-length plays, acts are further divided into scenes, which often mark a point in the action when the location changes or when a new character enters. See also scene.

Allegory
A symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a secondary meaning. Allegory often takes the form of a story in which the characters represent moral qualities. The most famous example in English is John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, in which the name of the central character, Pilgrim, epitomizes the book's allegorical nature. Kay Boyle's story "Astronomer's Wife" and Christina Rossetti's poem "Up-Hill" both contain allegorical elements.

Antagonist
A character or force against which another character struggles. Creon is Antigone's antagonist in Sophocles' play Antigone; Teiresias is the antagonist of Oedipus in Sophocles' Oedipus the King.

Aside (if analyzing characterization)
Words spoken by an actor directly to the audience, which are not "heard" by the other characters on stage during a play. In Shakespeare's Othello, Iago voices his inner thoughts a number of times as "asides" for the play's audience.

Catastrophe
The action at the end of a tragedy that initiates the denouement or falling action of a play. One example is the dueling scene in Act V of Hamlet in which Hamlet dies, along with Laertes, King Claudius, and Queen Gertrude.

Catharsis
The purging of the feelings of pity and fear that, according to Aristotle, occur in the audience of tragic drama. The audience experiences catharsis at the end of the play, following the catastrophe. In his Poetics, Aristotle discusses the importance of catharsis. The audience faces the misfortunes of the protagonist, which elicit pity and compassion. Simultaneously, the audience also confronts the failure of the protagonist, thus receiving a frightening reminder of human limitations and frailties. Ultimately, however, both these negative emotions are purged, because the tragic protagonist's suffering is an affirmation of human values rather than a despairing denial of them.

Character
An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change). In Shakespeare's Othello, Desdemona is a major character, but one who is static, like the minor character Bianca. Othello is a major character who is dynamic, exhibiting an ability to change.

Characterization
The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions. Readers come to understand the character Miss

Emily in Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" through what she says, how she lives, and what she does.

Chorus
A group of characters in Greek tragedy (and in later forms of dramatic) who comment on the action of a play without participation in it. Their leader is the choragos. Sophocles' Antigone and Oedipus the King both contain an explicit chorus with a choragos. Tennessee Williams's Glass Menagerie contains a character who functions like a chorus.

Climax
The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work. The climax of John Updike's "A & P," for example, occurs when Sammy quits his job as a cashier.

Comedy
A type of drama in which the characters experience reversals of fortune, usually for the better. In comedy, things work out happily in the end. Comic drama may be either romantic--characterized by a tone of tolerance and geniality--or satiric. Satiric works offer a darker vision of human nature, one that ridicules human folly. Shaw's Arms and the Man is a romantic comedy; Chekhov's Marriage Proposal is a satiric comedy.

Comic relief
The use of a comic scene to interrupt a succession of intensely tragic dramatic moments. The comedy of scenes offering comic relief typically parallels the tragic action that the scenes interrupt. Comic relief is lacking in Greek tragedy, but occurs regularly in Shakespeare's tragedies. One example is the opening scene of Act V of Hamlet, in which a gravedigger banters with Hamlet.

Complication
An intensification of the conflict in a story or play. Complication builds up, accumulates, and develops the primary or central conflict in a literary work. Frank O'Connor's story "Guests of the Nation" provides a striking example, as does Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal."

Conflict
A struggle between opposing forces in a story or play, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters. Lady Gregory's one-act play The Rising of the Moon exemplifies both types of conflict as the Policeman wrestles with his conscience in an inner conflict and confronts an antagonist in the person of the ballad singer.

Connotation
The associations called up by a word that goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Poets, especially, tend to use words rich in connotation. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" includes intensely connotative language, as in these lines: "Good men, the last wave by / Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Convention
A customary feature of a literary work, such as the use of a chorus in Greek tragedy, the inclusion of an explicit moral in a fable, or the use of a particular rhyme scheme in a villanelle. Literary conventions are defining features of particular literary genres, such as novel, short story, ballad, sonnet, and play.
Denotation
The dictionary meaning of a word. Writers typically play off a word's denotative meaning against its connotations, or suggested and implied associational implications. In the following lines from Peter Meinke's "Advice to My Son" the references to flowers and fruit, bread and wine denote specific things, but also suggest something beyond the literal, dictionary meanings of the words:

To be specific, between the peony and rose
Plant squash and spinach, turnips and tomatoes;
Beauty is nectar and nectar, in a desert, saves--
... and always serve bread with your wine.
But, son, always serve wine.

Denouement
The resolution of the plot of a literary work. The denouement takes place after the catastrophe, with the stage littered with corpses. During the denouement Fortinbras makes an entrance and a speech, and Horatio speaks his sweet lines in praise of Hamlet.

Deus ex machina
A god who resolves the entanglements of a play by supernatural intervention. The Latin phrase means, literally, "a god from the machine." The phrase refers to the use of artificial means to resolve the plot of a play.

Dialogue
The conversation of characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

Diction
The selection of words in a literary work. 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. We can speak of the diction in a literary work as particular to a character, as in Iago's and Desdemona's very different ways of speaking in Othello. We can also refer to a poet's diction as represented over the body of his or her work, as in Donne's or Hughes's diction.

Dramatic monologue (when analyzing characterization)
A type of poem in which a speaker addresses a silent listener. As readers, we overhear the speaker in a dramatic monologue. Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" represents the epitome of the genre.

Dramatis personae
Latin for the characters or persons in a play. Included among the dramatis personae of Miller's Death of a Salesman are Willy Loman, the salesman, his wife Linda, and his sons Biff and Happy.

Exposition
The first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot, in which necessary background information is provided. Ibsen's A Doll's House, for instance, begins with a conversation between the two central characters, a dialogue that fills the audience in on events that occurred before the action of the play begins, but which are important in the development of its plot.

Falling action
In the plot of a story or play, the action following the climax of the work that moves it towards its denouement or resolution. The falling action of Othello begins after Othello realizes that Iago is responsible for plotting against him by spurring him on to murder his wife, Desdemona.

Fiction
An imagined story, whether in prose, poetry, or drama. Ibsen's Nora is fictional, a "make-believe" character in a play, as are Hamlet and Othello. Characters like Robert Browning's Duke and Duchess from his poem "My Last Duchess" are fictional as well, though they may be based on actual historical individuals. And, of course, characters in stories and novels are fictional, though they, too, may be based, in some way, on real people. The important thing to remember is that writers embellish and embroider and alter actual life when they use real life as the basis for their work. They fictionalize facts, and deviate from real-life situations as they "make things up."

Figurative language
A form of language use in which writers and speakers convey something other than the literal meaning of their words. Examples include hyperbole or exaggeration, litotes or understatement, simile and metaphor, which employ comparison, and synecdoche and metonymy, in which a part of a thing stands for the whole.

Flashback
An interruption of a work's chronology to describe or present an incident that occurred prior to the main time frame of a work's action. Writers use flashbacks to complicate the sense of chronology in the plot of their works and to convey the richness of the experience of human time. Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" includes flashbacks.

Foil
A character who contrasts and parallels the main character in a play or story. Laertes, in Hamlet, is a foil for the main character; in Othello, Emilia and Bianca are foils for Desdemona.

Foot
A metrical unit composed of stressed and unstressed syllables. For example, an iamb or iambic foot is represented by "", that is, an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. Frost's line "Whose woods these are I think I know" contains four iambics, and is thus an iambic foot.

Foreshadowing
Hints of what is to come in the action of a play or a story. Ibsen's A Doll's House includes foreshadowing as does Synge's Riders to the Sea. So, too, do Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and Chopin's "Story of an Hour."

Fourth wall
The imaginary wall of the box theater setting, supposedly removed to allow the audience to see the action. The fourth wall is especially common in modern and contemporary plays such as Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, Wasserstein's Tender Offer, and Wilson's Fences.

Gesture
The physical movement of a character during a play. Gesture is used to reveal character, and may include facial expressions as well as movements of other parts of an actor's body. Sometimes a
playwright will be very explicit about both bodily and facial gestures, providing detailed instructions in the play's stage directions. Shaw's Arms and the Man includes such stage directions. See Stage direction.

**Hamartia (when analyzing characterization)**

the Greek word for error or failure, used by Aristotle in his Poetics (4th century BCE) to designate the false step that leads the protagonist in a tragedy to his or her downfall. The term has often been translated as "tragic flaw", but this misleadingly confines the cause of the reversal of fortunes to some personal defect of character, whereas Aristotle's emphasis was rather upon the protagonist's action, which could be brought about by misjudgment, ignorance, or some other cause.

**Hubris, (when analyzing characterization)**

though not specifically defined, was a legal term and was considered a crime in classical Athens. It was also considered the greatest sin of the ancient Greek world. That was so because it was not only proof of excessive pride, but also resulted in violent acts by or to those involved. The word was also used to describe actions of those who challenged the gods or their laws, especially in Greek tragedy, resulting in the protagonist's downfall.

**Hyperbole**

A figure of speech involving exaggeration. John Donne uses hyperbole in his poem: "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star."

**Iamb**

An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as in to-DAY. See Foot.

**Image**

A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea. Imagery refers to the pattern of related details in a work. In some works one image predominates either by recurring throughout the work or by appearing at a critical point in the plot. Often writers use multiple images throughout a work to suggest states of feeling and to convey implications of thought and action. Some modern poets, such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, write poems that lack discursive explanation entirely and include only images. Among the most famous examples is Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

**Imagery**


**Irony**

A contrast or discrepancy between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. In verbal irony, characters say the opposite of what they mean. In irony of circumstance or situation, the opposite of what is expected occurs. In dramatic irony, a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to the other characters. Flannery O'Connor's short stories employ all these forms of irony, as does Poe's "Cask of Amontillado."

**Literal language**

A form of language in which writers and speakers mean exactly what their words denote. See Figurative language, Denotation, and Connotation.

**Metaphor**

A comparison between essentially unlike things without an explicitly comparative word such as like or as. An example is "My love is a red, red rose," From Burns's "A Red, Red Rose." Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" is built entirely of metaphors. Metaphor is one of the most important of literary uses of language. Shakespeare employs a wide range of metaphor in his sonnets and his plays, often in such density and profusion that readers are kept busy analyzing and interpreting and unraveling them. Compare Simile.

**Meter**

The measured pattern of rhythmic accents in poems. See Foot and Iamb.

**Metonymy**

A figure of speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. An example: "We have always remained loyal to the crown." See Synecdoche.

**Monologue (when analyzing characterization)**

A speech by a single character without another character's response. See Dramatic monologue and Soliloquy.

**Motif (moh-TEEF)**

a recurring object, concept, or structure in a work of literature. A motif may also be two contrasting elements in a work, such as good and evil. In the Book of Genesis, we see the motif of separation again and again throughout the story. In the very first chapter, God separates the light from the darkness. Abraham and his descendants are separated from the rest of the nation as God's chosen people. Joseph is separated from his brothers in order that life might be preserved. Another motif is water, seen in Genesis as a means of destroying the wicked and in Matthew as a means of remitting sins by the employment of baptism. Other motifs in Genesis and Matthew include blood sacrifices, fire, lambs, and goats. A motif is important because it allows one to see main points and themes that the author is trying to express, in order that one might be able to interpret the work more accurately. Narrator

The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author. For example, the narrator of Joyce's "Araby" is not James Joyce himself, but a literary fictional character created expressly to tell the story. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" contains a communal narrator, identified only as "we." See Point of view.

**Peripeteia**

A sudden change of events or reversal of circumstances, especially in a literary work.

**Parody**

A humorous, mocking imitation of a literary work, sometimes sarcastic, but often playful and even respectful in its playful imitation. Examples include Bob McKenty's parody of Frost's "Dust of Snow" and Kenneth Koch's parody of Williams's "This is Just to Say."
Pathos
A quality of a play's action that stimulates the audience to feel pity for a character. Pathos is always an aspect of tragedy, and may be present in comedy as well.

Personification
The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze." Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" includes personification.

Plot
The unified structure of incidents in a literary work. See Conflict, Climax, Denouement, and Flashback.

Point of view (when analyzing narration/narrative structure)
The angle of vision from which a story is narrated. See Narrator. A work's point of view can be: first person, in which the narrator is a character or an observer, respectively; objective, in which the narrator knows or appears to know no more than the reader; omniscient, in which the narrator knows everything about the characters; and limited omniscient, which allows the narrator to know some things about the characters but not everything.

Props
Articles or objects that appear on stage during a play. The Christmas tree in A Doll's House and Laura's collection of glass animals in The Glass Menagerie are examples.

Proscenium
A theater that is inside a hall, as contrasted to an open theater; the theater of Moliere was an open one, but that of Sophocles was a fully closed proscenium theater; modern theaters are proscenium theaters.

Protagonist
The main character of a literary work--Hamlet and Othello in the plays named after them, Gregor Samsa in Kafka's Metamorphosis, Paul in Lawrence's "Rocking-Horse Winner."

Quatrain
A four-line stanza in a poem, the first four lines and the second four lines in a Petrarchan sonnet. A Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains followed by a couplet.

Recognition
The point at which a character understands his or her situation as it really is. Sophocles' Oedipus comes to this point near the end of Oedipus the King; Othello comes to a similar understanding of his situation in Act V of Othello.

Resolution
The sorting out or unraveling of a plot at the end of a play, novel, or story. See Plot.

Reversal
The point at which the action of the plot turns in an unexpected direction for the protagonist. Oedipus's and Othello's recognitions are also reversals. They learn what they did not expect to learn. See Recognition and also Irony.

Rising action
A set of conflicts and crises that constitute the part of a play's or story's plot leading up to the climax. See Climax, Denouement, and Plot.

Satire
A literary work that criticizes human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities, and follies. Swift's Gulliver's Travels is a famous example. Chekhov's Marriage Proposal and O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," have strong satirical elements.

Setting
The time and place of a literary work that establish its context. The stories of Sandra Cisneros are set in the American southwest in the mid to late 20th century, those of James Joyce in Dublin, Ireland in the early 20th century.

Soliloquy
A speech in a play that is meant to be heard by the audience but not by other characters on the stage. If there are no other characters present, the soliloquy represents the character thinking aloud. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech is an example. See Aside.

Stage direction
A playwright's descriptive or interpretive comments that provide readers (and actors) with information about the dialogue, setting, and action of a play. Modern playwrights, including Ibsen, Shaw, Miller, and Williams tend to include substantial stage directions, while earlier playwrights typically used them more sparsely, implicitly, or not at all. See Gesture.

Staging
The spectacle a play presents in performance, including the position of actors on stage, the scenic background, the props and costumes, and the lighting and sound effects. Tennessee Williams describes these in his detailed stage directions for The Glass Menagerie and also in his production notes for the play.

Stanza
A division or unit of a poem that is repeated in the same form--either with similar or identical patterns or rhyme and meter, or with variations from one stanza to another. The stanzas of Gertrude Schnackenberg's "Signs" are regular; those of Rita Dove's "Canary" are irregular.

Style
The way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences or in lines of dialogue or verse, and develops ideas and actions with description, imagery, and other literary techniques. See Connotation, Denotation, Diction, Figurative language, Image, Imagery, Irony, Metaphor, Narrator, Point of view, Syntax, and Tone.

Subject
What a story or play is about; to be distinguished from plot and theme. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is about the decline of a particular way of life endemic to the American south before the civil war. Its plot concerns how Faulkner describes and organizes the actions of the story's characters. Its theme is the overall meaning Faulkner conveys.

Subplot
A subsidiary or subordinate or parallel plot in a play or story that coexists with the main plot. The story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forms a subplot with the overall plot of Hamlet.
Symbol
An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself. The glass unicorn in The Glass Menagerie, the rocking horse in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the road in Frost's "The Road Not Taken"—all are symbols in this sense.

Syntax
The grammatical order of words in a sentence or line of verse or dialogue. The organization of words and phrases and clauses in sentences of prose, verse, and dialogue. In the following example, normal syntax (subject, verb, object order) is inverted:

"Whose woods these are I think I know."

The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. See discussion of Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an instant's Act."

Tone
The implied attitude of a writer toward the subject and characters of a work, as, for example, Flannery O'Connor's ironic tone in her "Good Country People." See Irony.

Tragedy
A type of drama in which the characters experience reversals of fortune, usually for the worse. In tragedy, catastrophe and suffering await many of the characters, especially the hero. Examples include Shakespeare's Othello and Hamlet; Sophocles' Antigone and Oedipus the King, and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. See Tragic flaw and Tragic hero.

Tragic flaw/hamartia (when analyzing characterization)
A weakness or limitation of character, resulting in the fall of the tragic hero. Othello's jealousy and too trusting nature is one example. See Tragedy and Tragic hero.

Tragic hero
A privileged, exalted character of high repute, who, by virtue of a tragic flaw and fate, suffers a fall from glory into suffering. Sophocles' Oedipus is an example. See Tragedy and Tragic flaw.

Unities
The idea that a play should be limited to a specific time, place, and story line. The events of the plot should occur within a twenty-four hour period, should occur within a given geographic locale, and should tell a single story. Aristotle argued that Sophocles' Oedipus the King was the perfect play for embodying the unities.

Verse & blank verse: verse means poetic language; blank verse is the type of poetic form in which the lines are in iambic pentameter but without rhyme (iambic pentameter means having five iambic units like: “a bout”1, “the world”2, “I ne”3, “ver thought”4, “before”5; this should sound like ta-dum ta-dum ta-dum ta-dum ta-dum if you say the syllables in bold letters louder than the others; also try this iambic pentameter line: “My mistress’s eyes are nothing like the sun”)

Villain: the character which is against the protagonist (hero, positive character, central character); the villain is also called 'antagonist'