**Basic Literary Terms - taken from Purdue’s OWL**

* **Characterization**: The ways individual characters are represented by the narrator or author of a text. This includes descriptions of the characters’ physical appearances, personalities, actions, interactions, and dialogue.
  + **Antagonist**: A character or characters in a text with whom the protagonist opposes.
  + **Personification**: The use of a person to represent a concept, quality, or object. Personification can also refer to “a person who is considered a representative type of a particular quality or concept” (Taafe 120).
  + **Protagonist**: The primary character in a text, often positioned as “good” or the character with whom readers are expected to identify. Protagonists usually oppose an antagonist.
* **Dialogue**: Spoken exchanges between characters in a dramatic or literary work, usually between two or more speakers.
* **Imagery**: A term used to describe an author’s use of vivid descriptions “that evoke sense-impressions by literal or figurative reference to perceptible or ‘concrete’ objects, scenes, actions, or states” (Baldick 121). Imagery can refer to the literal landscape or characters described in a narrative or the theoretical concepts an author employs.
* **Plot**: The sequence of events that occur through a work to produce a coherent narrative or story.
  + **Climax**: The height of conflict and intrigue in a narrative. This is when events in the narrative and characters’ destines are most unclear; the climax often appears as a decision the protagonist must make or a challenge he or she must overcome in order to for the narrative obtain resolution.
  + **Denouement**: The “falling action” of a narrative, when the climax and central conflicts are resolved and a resolution is found. In a play, this is typically the last act and in a novel it might include the final chapters.
* **Point of View:** The perspective (visual, interpretive, bias, etc) a text takes when presenting its plot and narrative. For instance, an author might write a narrative from a specific character’s point of view, which means that that character is our narrative and readers experience events through his or her eyes.
  + **First person**: A story told from the perspective of one or several characters, each of whom typically uses the word “I.” This means that readers “see” or experience events in the story through the narrator’s eyes.
  + **Second person**: A narrative perspective that typically addresses that audience using “you.” This mode can help authors address readers and invest them in the story.
  + **Third person**: Describes a narrative told from the perspective of an outside figure who does not participate directly in the events of a story. This mode uses “he,” “she,” and “it” to describe events and characters.
* **Symbol(ism):** An object or element incorporated into a narrative to represent another concept or concern. Broadly, representing one thing with another. Symbols typically recur throughout a narrative and offer critical, though often overlooked, information about events, characters, and the author’s primary concerns in telling the story.
* **Theme**:  According to Baldick, a theme may be defined as “a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work’s treatment of its subject-matter; or a topic recurring in a number or literary works” (Baldick 258). Themes in literature tend to differ depending on author, time period, genre, style, purpose, etc.
* **Tone**: A way of communicating information (in writing, images, or sound) that conveys an attitude. Authors convey tone through a combination of word-choice, imagery, perspective, style, and subject matter. By adopting a specific tone, authors can help readers accurately interpret meaning in a text.

**Terms for Interpreting Authorial Voice**

* **Irony**: Typically refers to saying one thing and meaning the opposite, often to shock audiences and emphasize the importance of the truth.
* **Satire**: A style of writing that mocks, ridicules, or pokes fun at a person, belief, or group of people in order to challenge them. Often, texts employing satire use sarcasm, irony, or exaggeration to assert their perspective.
* **Stream of consciousness**: A mode of writing in which the author traces his or her thoughts verbatim into the text. Typically, this style offers a representation of the author’s exact thoughts throughout the writing process and can be used to convey a variety of different emotions or as a form of pre-writing.

**Terms for Interpreting Layers of Meaning**

* **Allegory**: a literary mode that attempts to convert abstract concepts, values, beliefs, or historical events into characters or other tangible elements in a narrative. Examples include, *Gulliver’s Travels, The Faerie Queene, Pilgrim’s Progress,* and*Paradise Lost*.
* **Allusion**: When a text references, incorporates, or responds to an earlier piece (including literature, art, music, film, event, etc). T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) offers an extensive example of allusion in literature. According to Baldick, “The technique of allusion is an economical means of calling upon the history or the literary tradition that author and reader are assumed to share” (7).
* **Hyperbole**: exaggerated language, description, or speech that is not meant to be taken literally, but is used for emphasis. For instance, “I’ve been waiting here for ages” or “This bag weighs a ton.”
* **Metaphor**: a figure of speech that refers to one thing by another in order to identify similarities between the two (and therefore define each in relation to one another).
* **Metonymy**: a figure of speech that substitutes one aspect or attribute for the whole itself. For instance, referring to a woman as “a skirt” or the sea as “the deep.” Doing so can not only evoke a specific tone (determined by the attribute being emphasized or the thing to which it refers), but also comments on the importance of the specific element that is doing the substituting.
* **Parody**: a narrative work or writing style that mocks or mimics another genre or work. Typically, parodies exaggerate and emphasize elements from the original work in order to ridicule, comment on, or criticize their message.
* **Simile**: a figure of speech that compares two people, objects, elements, or concepts using “like” or “as.”

**Works Cited**

For more information or to read about other literary terms, please see the following texts:

Baldick, Chris. *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Mikics, David. *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. Print.

Taafe, James G. *A Student’s Guide to Literary Term*s. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1967. Print.