
SECTION ONE : A – C

Dictionary of Literary Terms

(the) Absurd - an avant-garde style in which structure, plot, and characterization are disregarded or garbled in order to stress the lack of logic in nature and man's isolation in a universe which has no meaning or value.

The term is derived from the Latin *absurdus*, formed from *ab* and *surdus*, meaning “deaf” and “stupid”. Albert Camus used the word in discussing his concept of existentialism, the philosophy that the individual is responsible for whatever decisions (s)he makes according to the doctrine of free will, but that (s)he makes those decisions without knowing what is right or wrong, as demonstrated in his novel, *The Stranger*. In this novel, the protagonist, Meursault, commits a murder without seeming to realize either the seriousness or the consequences of such an act; there was neither an evaluation of the act before it was committed nor remorse for having done “wrong” after the fact. Living this way was considered absurd or senseless, illogical, and contrary to common sense.

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is an example of an absurdist short story, in which a man wakes one day having been mysteriously transformed into an insect. The term is usually used to indicate the Theater of the Absurd, a phrase invented by Martin Esslin in 1961 to refer to the plays of such 1950s dramatists as Eugène Ionesco, Edward Albee, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and Samuel Beckett.

Aesthetics (also spelled esthetics) - means the study of the emotions and the mind in relation to their sense of beauty in literature and other fine arts, but separately from moral, social, political, practical, or economic considerations. This area of study is concerned with the appreciation and criticism of what is considered beautiful or ugly. It is sometimes referred to as “art for art’s sake.”

The word comes from the Greek *aisthetikos*, meaning “perceptive,” and was derived from *aisthanesthai*, which means “to feel” or “to perceive.”

The term was introduced in 1753 by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, but the study of the nature of beauty had been pursued for centuries, certainly since the time of Plato. The later Nineteenth Century saw the blossoming of the aesthetic movement in England. In the conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873), a seminal work in the articulation of aesthetic theory, Walter Pater writes, “For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.” Other major proponents of the aesthetic included John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde.

Affective fallacy - the error of judging a literary work by its emotional effect upon readers or a confusion between the work itself and its results.

The term comes from combining two words: affective, which means pertaining to emotional effects or natures, and fallacy, which means false or mistaken idea.

Affect was a Middle English word taken from the Middle French *affaire*, meaning “to influence;” *affaire* was derived from the Latin *afficere*, which was formed by joining *ab* and *facere*, meaning “to do.” Fallacy is from the Latin *fallacia*, which was derived from *fallac-* or *fallax*, meaning “deceitful.” These terms were originally from *fallere*, meaning “to deceive.”

In essence, avoidance of the affective fallacy demonstrates an attempt to create objective literary criticism, in which the critic is concerned with describing the rhetorical composition of a

work— how it functions — rather than with describing the impact of a work — what it does — on the reader.

see: *catharsis*

Allegory - an extended metaphor in which a person, abstract idea, or event stands for itself and for something else. It usually involves moral or spiritual concepts which are more significant than the actual narrative.

The term is from the Greek *allegoria*, a joining of two other Greek words: *allos*, meaning “other”, and *agoreuein*, meaning “to speak.”

The most famous allegory in English is Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) which describes the adventures of the human soul as if it were on a journey. Parts of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1310–1314) are also allegorical. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1946) is a political allegory in which the story of the revolution of the animals on an English farm stands as a critique of both the capitalist democracies of the west and the totalitarian regime that had grown out of the communist revolution in Russia.

see: *fable, morality play, myth, parable, satire*

Alliteration (sometimes called initial rhyme) - common in poetry and occasionally in prose, this is the repetition of an initial sound in two or more words of a phrase, line, or sentence. It is usually a consonant and marks the stressed syllables in a line of poetry or prose. Alliteration may be considered ornamental or as a decoration which appeals to the sense of hearing.

The word comes from the Latin *ad litteram*, which means “according to the letter.”

This device was consistently used in Old English poetry, but fell out of favor in the Middle Ages. Now it is used to emphasize meaning and is especially effective in oratory. It is characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry, as in *Beowulf*, and is still used by modern poets in nonsense verse, tongue twisters, and jingles.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare makes satirical use of alliteration in order to demonstrate the artisan-acting troupe's lack of poetic skill. In the play within the play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, Quince says as prologue:

Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade,
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast.

Act V, scene i : lines 155 – 156

Allusion - a reference, usually brief, often casual, occasionally indirect, to a person, event, or condition thought to be familiar (but sometimes actually obscure or unknown) to the reader. This holds true especially for the characters and events of mythology, legends, and history. Association is an essential part of allusion. The purpose of allusion is to bring a world of experience outside the limitations of a statement to the reader.

The term comes from Latin *alludere*, which means “to play with,” “jest,” or “refer to.”

John Milton uses allusion in *Paradise Lost*:

...; and what resounds
In fable or romance of Uther's son
Begirt with British and Armoric knights;
And all who since, baptized or infidel
Jousted in Aspramont or Montalban,
Damask, or Marocco, or Trebisonde,
Or whom Biserta sent from Afric shore
When Charlemain with all his peerage fell
By Fontarabbia.

Book 1 : lines 479 – 587

In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Shylock seeks to compliment Portia for her agreeing that Bassanio must keep his bargain, Shakespeare has Shylock use the biblical allusion:

A Daniel come to judgment! Yea, a Daniel.

Act IV, scene i : line 221

Ambiguity - a doubtfulness or uncertainty about the intention or meaning of something. It usually refers to a statement that is subject to more than one interpretation. The term is used for words that suggest two or more appropriate meanings or that convey both a basic meaning and complex overtones of that meaning. Sometimes, authors make deliberate choices of words that simultaneously cause several different streams of thought in the reader's mind. Ambiguity is also used to mean confusion between the denotation and connotation of a literary work. A simple kind of ambiguity is the use of homophones to promote a multiplicity of possible meanings. In Sonnet 135, Shakespeare puns on the word "Will," invoking its sense as one's wish, as well as its sense as a nickname for "William": "whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will" (line 1).

The word is derived from the Latin *ambiguus*, which means "doubtful," and was formed from *ambigere*—a combination of *amb*, meaning "both ways," and *agere*, meaning "drive."

see: *allusion, connotation*

Anachronism - an error in chronology, or placing an event, person, item, or language expression in the wrong period.

The term is originally from the Greek *anakhronismos* formed by combining *ana*, which means "back or backwards," and *khronos*, which means "time."

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, an anachronism is used:

Brutus: Peace! count the clock.

Cassius: The clock has stricken three.

Act II, scene i : lines 193 – 194

There were no clocks during Roman times, and the striking clock was not invented until 1,400 years after Caesar's death.

Contemporary theater often uses anachronisms, such as when one of Shakespeare's plays is performed in modern-day clothing.

Analogy - the relationship of similarity between two or more entities or a partial similarity on which a comparison is based. An example is the classic analogy between the heart and a pump. In argumentation and persuasion, analogy is often used as a form of reasoning in which one thing is compared to or contrasted with another in certain respects, based on the known similarity or dissimilarity in other respects. Analogy is often used to paint vivid word pictures.

The term comes from the Greek *analogia*, meaning “proportion.”

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift describes the societies of the Lilliputians and the Brobdingnags in such a way as to make their characteristics and weaknesses analogous to human society.

see: *metaphor, simile*

Antagonist - the character who strives against another main character. This character opposes the hero or protagonist in drama. The term is also used to describe one who contends with or opposes another in a fight, conflict, or battle of wills. In literature, this is the principal opponent or foil of the main character and is considered the villain unless the protagonist is a villain; in that case, the antagonist is the hero.

The word is derived from the Greek *antagonistes*, which means “rival” and was formed from the combining of *anti*, meaning “against,” and *agon*, meaning a “contest.”

Shakespeare's plays provide apt examples of antagonists: his Macduff in *Macbeth* is an antagonist and the hero, since the protagonist—Macbeth—is a villain; Laertes and Claudius are the antagonists of Hamlet in the play of the same name; Iago is Othello's antagonist in *Othello*. Also, the antagonist does not have to be another person. In Jack London's story “To Build a Fire,” the antagonist is the bitterly cold weather.

see: *protagonist*

Anticlimax - a drop, often sudden and unexpected, from a dignified or important idea or situation to a trivial one or a descent from something sublime to something ridiculous. In fiction and drama, this refers to action which is disappointing in contrast to the previous moment of intense interest or anything which follows the climax. The effect may be comic and is often intended to be. According to Samuel Johnson, who first recorded the word, it is "A sentence in which the last part expresses something lower than the first."

The term comes from the combination of two Greek words: *anti*, which means "against" or "the reverse of," and *klimax*, which means "a ladder" and was derived from *klinein* meaning "to slope."

An example of an anticlimax is when the indigent protagonist finds a great amount of money for which (s)he has been intently searching and does nothing with it.

see: *climax*

Antithesis - contrary ideas expressed in a balanced sentence. It is the juxtaposition of two words, phrases, clauses, or sentences contrasted or opposed in meaning in such a way as to give emphasis to their contrasting ideas and give the effect of balance. This is a device often used in rhetoric.

The word comes from the Greek *anti*, meaning "against," and *tithenai*, which means "to place" or "to set against."

In Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Adam and Eve are described using antitheses:

For contemplation he and valour formed,
For softness she and sweet attractive grace;
He for God only, she for God in him.

Book V, lines 297 – 299

see: *epigram, figure of speech, oxymoron*

Aphorism - a brief, pithy, usually concise statement or observation of a doctrine, principle, truth, or sentiment. Aphorisms are usually not anonymous.

The word comes from the Greek *aphorizein*, which means “to mark off by boundaries” and was formed by combining *apo*, meaning “from,” and *horos*, meaning “a limit.” The term was first used by Hippocrates.

An example of an aphorism is Benjamin Franklin’s

Early to bed
and early to rise,
makes a man
healthy, wealthy, and wise.

see: *epigram, proverb*

Apocalyptic - connected with revelation. The term is also used to describe literature that provides a prophecy or revelation. In contemporary usage, this refers to any literary selection that reveals and predicts the future. Usually, the term is used to refer to the coming of the end of the world and the expected final battle between good and evil.

The word is from the Greek *apokalupsis*, which means “unveiling,” and was originally derived from *kaluptein*, meaning “to cover.”

It is used as the title of the last book in The New Testament of the Bible: The Apocalypse or the Revelation of St. John the Divine. The final two books of *Paradise Lost* are apocalyptic, as the archangel Michael shows Adam how human history will climax in the final judgement of God.

Apology - a defense and justification for some belief, doctrine, piece of writing, cause, or action without any admission of blame with which we contemporarily associate the word. In the Eighteenth Century, the word came to be used loosely almost as a synonym for autobiography without any suggestion of justifying or defending the writer’s ideas or conduct.

The term comes from the Greek *apologia*, meaning defense. This Greek word was formed by joining *apo*, which means away, and *logia*, which means speaking.

Plato recorded Socrates's *Apologia* in the Fourth Century B.C. At the end of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, there is a retraction or apology for his work; in this case, apology means both an explanation and an expression of regret.

Arbitrary - lacking any natural basis or substantial justification; determined by whim with little thought.

This term was originally from the Latin *arbitrari*, derived from *arbitr-* or *arbiter*, meaning “to witness.”

Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* contains many instances of Huck's arbitrary choice of actions, such as when he chose not to accept the Widow Douglas's home as his own, preferring to run away instead or, as Huck stated in the second paragraph of the novel, “. . . when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out.”

Archetype (also called prototype) - the original model or pattern from which copies are made or from which something develops. It is also a symbol, theme, setting, or character that is thought to have some universal meaning and recurs in different times and places in myth, literature, folklore, dreams, and rituals.

The term is from the Greek *archetupon*, meaning “pattern” or “model.”

The psychologist Carl Jung identified the archetype in the collective unconscious of mankind: the ideas or modes of thought derived from the experiences of a race—such as birth, death, love, family life, struggles—inherited in the subconscious of an individual from ancestors and expressed in myths, dreams, and literature.

Plato was the first philosopher to use archetypes, especially those of beauty, truth, and goodness. Sophocles used the archetypes of blindness, patricide, incest, and fratricide. Hawthorne and Melville focused on the archetypes of sin, retribution, and death

in their works (*The Scarlet Letter* and *Billy Budd*, respectively). The Greek Myth of Pandora introduces the archetype of the mischievous woman, exemplified by Madame Merle in James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

see: *folklore, imagery, literature, myth.*

Ballad - a short, narrative folk song that fixes on the most dramatic part of a story, moving to its conclusion by the means of dialogue and a series of incidences. It represents a type of literary and musical development across Europe in the late Middle Ages and tends to have a tight dramatic structure that sometimes omits all preliminary material, all exposition and description, even all motivation, to focus on the climactic scene. The narrator is impersonal and the listener or reader is left to supply the antecedent material. Folk ballads are transmitted orally, and therefore, subject to continual change, although most seem to be domestic, simple, stanzad, rhymed, and use language and action which are stylized. Clichés and conventionalized conduct are typical in ballads which are still common in northern Greece, parts of the central Balkans, and Sicily. Originally, the term signified a song accompanied by a dance. Later, it came to mean a narrative poem with short stanzas designed for singing or oral recitation. There are four types of ballads:

1. folk ballad which is derived from the medieval oral traditions
2. literary ballad which is a deliberate attempt by its author to capture the charm of the folk ballad
3. broadside ballad which proliferated in the Eighteenth Century, sold for a penny: printed on sheets of paper called "broadside," they included suggestions for the tune to which they should be sung
4. a sentimental tune with melodramatic lyrics, popular in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

The word comes from the Old French *ballade*, which derived from the Provençal *ballada*. This originated from the Low Latin *ballare*, which means "to dance."

An example of a ballad is "Bill," which has been sung by sailors for decades:

He lay dead on the cluttered deck and stared at the cold
skies,
With never a friend to mourn for him nor a hand to close his
eyes:
“Bill, he’s dead,” was all they said; “he’s dead, ’n’ there he
lies.”
The mate came forward at seven bells and spat across the
rail:
“Just lash him up wi’ some holystone in a clout o’ rotten sail,
“’N’, rot ye, get a gait on ye, ye’re slower’n a bloody snail!”
When the rising moon was a copper disc and the sea was a
strip of steel,
We dumped him down to the swaying weeds ten fathom be-
neath the keel.
“It’s rough about Bill,” the fo’c’s’le said, “we’ll have to stand
his wheel.”

see: *folklore*

Bard - one of an ancient Celtic order of versifiers, especially one who was highly trained as a composer, singer, and harpist who recited heroic and adventurous poems. This type of versifier was the oral historian, political critic, eulogizer, and entertainer of his society. Poems passed from bard to bard orally with each bard adding some personal embroidery. Their memorization was aided by certain formulas such as fixed phrases and repeated verses or groups of verses. The most prominent bards lived in medieval and post-medieval Wales and Ireland, many as residents in wealthy homes, others as itinerants. In Wales, bards were often nobles and formed guilds to set standards for writing and reciting. They were repeatedly outlawed by the English as politically inciting, causing their gradual extinction. The word is still used to describe a recognized singer at the Welsh musical festival, Eisteddfod.

The word was taken from the Gaelic and Irish *bard* or *bardh*, approximately meaning “poet,” but specifically meaning the type of poet described above.

Now the word is a synonym for poet as in “Shakespeare, the Bard of Avon.”

Bibliography - a list of readings on a particular subject. Included in the list are authors, titles, editions, and dates and places of publication. Bibliographies can be divided into two categories: the enumerative, which lists alphabetically or chronologically, and the critical, which lists evaluations or comparisons of the items. In library science, however, the term means the study of the history, physical description, and classification of books, graphic materials, etc.

The word is from the Greek *bibliographia*, meaning “the writing of books” and was used to describe the writing or copying of books until the mid-Eighteenth Century.

An example of a bibliography may be found at the end of this book.

Black comedy - Often considered perverted and morbid, black comedy depicts situations normally thought of as tragic or grave as humorous. Specifically, it displays marked disillusionment and depicts humans without convictions and with little hope. The term is also used to describe theater dealing with sinister or disturbing subjects handled lightly in an attempt to offend and shock, as is common in Theater of the Absurd.

Black is from the Middle English *blak* derived from the Old English *blaec*, which is probably the same as the Latin *flagrare*, meaning “to burn.” Comedy is derived from the Latin *comoedia* which, in turn, was from the Greek *komoidia* formed by joining *komos*, meaning “revel,” and, *aidein*, meaning “to sing.”

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. is a Twentieth-Century novelist whose works, including *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are filled with black comedy. There are representatives of the genre in Twentieth Century drama such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

see: *absurd*

Blank verse (also called unrhymed iambic pentameter) - unrhymed lines of ten syllables each with the even-numbered syllables bearing the accents. Blank verse is considered best

for dramatic verse in English since it is the verse form closest to the rhythms of everyday English speech and has been the dominant verse form of English drama and narrative poetry since the mid-Sixteenth Century. Such verse is blank in rhyme only, having a definite meter, although variations in meter are sometimes used. As Milton explained in his 1667 preface to *Paradise Lost*:

The Measure is English Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin; Rime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in larger Works especially, but the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter.

The term is originally from the French *blanc*, meaning “white”—in the sense of “left white” or “requiring something to be filled in.”

The term was first used by the Earl of Surrey, Henry Howard, in 1540 in his translation of Books II and III of *The Aeneid* of Virgil, but previously had been adapted by Italian Renaissance writers from classical sources. It was used a great deal for reflective and narrative poems until the late Seventeenth Century. In the latter Nineteenth Century, the English romantic poets—Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats—made use of blank verse. Later yet, the English poets, Robert Browning and Lord Tennyson, and the American poets, Robinson and Frost, employed it for less lofty themes, leading its use to become more colloquial in tone.

In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus’s speech to Hippolyta explaining the lovers’ rearrangement of couples is written in blank verse:

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth,
from earth to heaven;
And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

Act V, scene i : lines 12 – 17

Bombast - originally, cotton or any soft material used for padding to produce clothes in the fashion of the Sixteenth Century. It has come to mean a highflown unnatural style, rather inflated and insincere, pretentious, ranting, and using extravagant language. Also, it can denote extravagance at the expense of content.

The word is from the Greek *bombux*, meaning “silkworm” or “silk,” and the Latin *bombyx*, meaning “silkworm,” “something made of silk, any fine fiber, or cotton.” Both were used to form the Old French *bombace*, meaning “cotton.”

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago uses the word in complaining to Roderigo about Othello:

But he, as loving of his own pride and purposes,
Evades them with a bombast circumstance
Horribly stuff'd with epithets of war;
And, in conclusion,
Nonsuits my mediators.

Act I, scene i : lines 13 – 17

see: *hyperbole*

Canon - a standard of judgment or a criterion. It is also an approved list of books belonging in the Christian Bible, in addition to being the accepted list of any given order, and the list of books accepted as Scripture. The term is increasingly used to refer to those works of literature that have come to be considered standard in any anthology or course of study. In addition, it refers to the works of an author which are accepted as genuine, such as the Chaucer Canon.

The term is derived from the Middle French *canon*, which was adapted from the Italian *cannone*, meaning “large tube.” This definition evolved from the Latin *canna*, which meant “cane or reed.” Common usage eventually led to the term being defined as a straight rod or bar, a carpenter's rule, or a standard of excellence. Greek authors were known as *kanones* or “models of excellence.”

Melville's canon consists of *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*.

Canto - one of the main or larger divisions of a long poem. It is also used to denote a singing or chanting section of a poem, or a subdivision of an epic or narrative (comparable to a chapter in a novel).

The word is taken from the Italian, which originally took it from the Latin *cantus*, meaning “song.”

Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* is divided into cantos.

Catharsis - any emotional discharge which brings about a moral or spiritual renewal or welcome relief from tension and anxiety. The usual intent is for an audience to leave feeling this relief from tension or anxiety after having viewed a play.

The word comes from the Greek *katharis*, meaning “cleansing, or purification.” This evolved from *kathairo*, which means I cleanse, and *katharos*, which means “pure or clean.”

Catharsis was referred to by Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.) in his *Poetics*:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; . . . through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

Book 6 : 2

Character - an aggregate of traits and features that form the nature of some person or animal. It also refers to moral qualities and ethical standards and principles. In literature, character refers to a person represented in a story, novel, play, etc.

The word is from the Greek *kharakter*, meaning “stamp,” and *kharassein*, meaning “to engrave.” Originally, the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (372 – 287 B.C.), a pupil of Aristotle’s, used it in his book *Characters* which contained short prose sketches of different types of people molded to a pattern which served as a model for some Seventeenth-Century writers. In Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century England, a character was a formal sketch or descriptive analysis of a particular virtue or vice as represented in a person, what is now more often called a character sketch.

Chaucer wrote character sketches in the General Prologue to his *The Canterbury Tales*.

Characterization - the creation of the image of imaginary persons in drama, narrative poetry, the novel, and the short story. Characterization generates plot and is revealed by actions, speech, thoughts, physical appearance, and the other characters' thoughts or words about him.

The etymology and derivation of the word are the same as those for character.

In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's use of dialect, running away, his guardian's feelings about him, and Jim's response to him all comprise Twain's characterization of his protagonist.

see: *allegory, fable, plot, thesis*

Chorus - a group of singers distinct from the principal performers in a dramatic or musical performance and, also, the song or refrain that they sing.

The word comes from the Greek *choros*, meaning "a company of dancers or singers," or "a group of persons singing in unison."

In ancient Greece, a chorus was a group of male singers and dancers who participated in religious festivals and dramatic performances as actors, commenting on the deeds of the characters and interpreting the significance of events within the play for the audience.

In Aeschylus's works, the chorus takes part in the action of the play, while in Sophocles's, the chorus comments on the action. In Euripides's works, the chorus is lyrical. During the Elizabethan era, a single actor recited both the prologue and the epilogue, and sometimes commented in-between acts to interpret the significance of events, as in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, in which The Chorus is a character. Contemporarily, the playwrights T. S. Eliot and Brecht used choruses in their *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948), respectively.

Chronicle (also called history) - a detailed and continuous record of events, usually a systematic account or narration of events that contain little or no interpretation or analysis.

The word is from the Greek *khronos*, meaning “time,” and *khronik*, meaning “annals.”

Chronicles were used as a form of history from Roman times until the early 1600s when they were largely replaced by biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, logs, travel books, and narratives of sea voyages and exploration.

Shakespeare adapted Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577) for his history plays, such as *Henry V*.

Climax - the moment in a play, novel, short story, or narrative poem at which the crisis comes to its point of greatest intensity and is resolved. It is also the peak of emotional response from a reader or spectator, and it usually represents the turning point in the action. Additionally, the term is used for the arrangement of words, clauses, or sentences in order of their importance, the least forcible coming first and the others rising in power until the last or, simply, the last term of the arrangement. Climax also means a culmination.

The word comes from the Greek *klimax*, meaning “a ladder,” and *klinein*, meaning “to slope, or slant.”

The climax of *Beowulf* is when Beowulf slays the mother of the monster, Grendel. Hardy's *Tess of the D'urbervilles* (1891) climaxes when Tess murders Alec D'urberville, who has harassed and tormented her throughout the novel.

see: *anticlimax*, *denouement*

Closure - the sense of completion or resolution at the end of a literary work or part of a work. In literary criticism, it is the reduction of a work's meanings to a single and complete sense that excludes the claims of other interpretations.

The term came from Middle English, which took it from Middle French, and was originally from the Latin *clausura*, meaning “to close.”

An example of closure is the Finale in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* in which the author explains what happened to each of the characters in the novel.

Colloquialism - a word or phrase used in an easy, informal style of writing or speaking. It is usually more appropriate in speech than formal writing. Colloquialisms appear often in literature since they provide a sense of actual conversation and use the pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary of everyday speech.

The word is taken from the Latin *colloqui*, which is a joining of *com*, meaning “with or together,” and *loqui*, meaning “to speak” and “conversation.”

Mark Twain makes use of colloquialisms in his *Huckleberry Finn*, such as in the opening line of the story:

“You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain’t no matter.”

see: *dialogue*, *idiom*

Comedy - a ludicrous and amusing event or series of events designed to provide enjoyment and produce smiles or laughter usually written in a light, familiar, bantering, or satirical style. Comedy is the opposite of tragedy. Dramatic comedy begins in difficulty and rapidly involves its characters in amusing situations and ends happily, but not all comedies are humorous and lighthearted. It differs from burlesque and farce in that comedy has a more closely knit plot, more sensible and intelligent dialogue, and more plausible characterization. Often comedy assures its desired effect by stressing some oddity or incongruity of character, speech, or action—perhaps by caricature or exaggeration. There are many different kinds of comedy with the most usual being:

1. the comedy of humors in which characters' actions are controlled by some whim or humor,
2. the comedy of manners which involves the conventions or manners of artificial and sophisticated society, and
3. the comedy of intrigue or situation which depends more on plot than characterization.

There are also topical, romantic, satirical, and verbal wit comedies.

The word comes from the French *comédie* which was derived from the Greco-Latin *comoedia* which was formed by combining *komos*, meaning "to revel," and *aeidein*, meaning "to sing."

In the Middle Ages, comedy referred to narrative poems that ended happily, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320). Prior to that, comedy may be traced as far back as Aristophanes, the Fifth Century B.C. Greek playwright.

An example of contemporary comedy comes from Faye Kellerman's *The Quality of Mercy*:

"Aye, a strong neck I have. Yet it is neither as long nor graceful as thine—" He corrected himself. "As *yours*. As far as the head is concerned, I've been told I have a head for words, yet not much of one for numbers and none for science and languages, as you have. So as far as heads go, you are heads above me. Which explains why your neck is longer than mine."

see: *black comedy, comic relief, farce*

Comic relief (also called episode and interlude) - a humorous scene, incident, or remark occurring in the midst of a serious or tragic literary selection and deliberately designed to relieve emotional intensity and simultaneously to heighten, increase, and highlight the seriousness or tragedy of the action. Apart from being a simple diversion, though, comic relief normally plays some part in advancing the action of drama.

The phrase comes from two words: the first, comic, has the same etymology as that of comedy which is discussed above; relief

may be traced from Middle English, back to Middle French, and originally to the Old French *relever*, meaning “to relieve.”

Since the Sixteenth Century, tragedians have almost universally used comic relief, as in Shakespeare’s drunken porter in *Macbeth*:

Here’s a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell gate, he should have old turning the key. Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there, i’ the name of Belzebub? Here’s a farmer that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty. Come in time! Have napkins enow about you; here you’ll sweat for’t. Knock, knock! Who’s there, in the other devil’s name? Faith, here’s an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator! Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there? Faith, here’s an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose. Come in, tailor. Here you may roast your goose. Knock, knock! Never at quiet! What are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I’ll devil-porter it no further. I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire. Anon, anon! I pray you remember the porter.

Act II, scene iii : lines 1 – 19

see: *black comedy, comedy, farce, subplot*

Conceit - describing a person or idea by use of an analogy which often seems farfetched but proves surprisingly apt in pointing out parallels between the two being compared. A conceit may be considered an extravagant metaphor making an analogy between totally dissimilar things.

The word comes from the Latin *concupere* or *conceptum*, which was formed by combining *con*, meaning “with or together,” and *capere*, meaning “to take.” Originally, the word was used to mean “concept or idea.”

The term has been used since Petrarch (1304 – 1374). The fanciful images and startling comparisons frequently used in Elizabethan poetry are conceits. In his sonnets, Shakespeare used conceits such as:

“So you are to my thoughts as food to life, or as sweet-season’d showers are to the ground.”

LXXV : lines 1-2

see: *analogy, hyperbole, metaphor, oxymoron, paradox*

Connotation - suggestions and associations which surround a word as opposed to its bare, literal meaning. It is the opposite of denotation. Literature uses connotation; science and philosophy use denotation. Connotation refers to qualities, attributes, and characteristics implied or suggested by the word and depends upon the context in which the word is used. Metaphors depend a great deal on connotation. Connotations often elicit emotional responses from the reader.

The word is from the Latin *connotare*, meaning “to mark together.”

In his love poetry, John Donne often uses the word “die” which in the Renaissance had a sexual connotation, such as in these lines from “The Canonization:”

“We die and rise the same and prove mysterious by this love.”

see: *context, device, figure of speech, metaphor*

Content (also called subject matter or substance) - things or substances in an enclosed space, such as topics, ideas, statements, or facts in a book, document, letter, etc. This is true not only of forms, but also thought, feeling, attitude, and intention as conveyed by the words and their arrangement—especially what is said, rather than how it is said, in literature and in poetry.

The word is taken directly from the Latin *continere*, meaning “to contain.”

Context - the part of a written (or spoken) statement which leads up to, follows, and specifies the meaning of that statement. The context of a group of words is nearly always very intimately connected as to throw light upon not only the meaning of individual words, but also the sense and purpose of an entire work.

The term is taken from the Latin *contextus* which is from *con-textere*, meaning “to weave together.”

Understanding the context in which a work of literature was produced often leads to a deeper understanding of the work itself; for instance, understanding the social and economic position of women in the early Nineteenth Century can provide a greater insight into the characterizations of women in Jane Austen's novels.

Couplet - a pair of successive lines of verse, especially a pair that rhymes, that are of the same metrical length, and form a single unit. The term is also used for lines that express a complete thought or form a separate stanza. Couplets are usually written in decasyllabic lines. A closed couplet is one that is logically and grammatically complete.

The word comes from the French diminutive of *couple* which was derived from the Latin *copula*, meaning “a band or bond.”

The form was first used by Chaucer in the Fourteenth Century. Tudor and Jacobean poets and dramatists used it as a variation of blank verse and to round off a scene or act. The couplet eventually evolved into the heroic couplet, which was rhymed iambic pentameter and popular in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Nineteenth-Century Romantic poetry used the couplet, as do epigrams.

Shakespeare used this form in the concluding lines of his sonnets. Chaucer used it in his “Merchant's Tale” within *The Canterbury Tales*:

Whilom ther was dwellynge in Lumbardye
A worthy knyght, that born was of Pavye,

In which he lyved in greet prosperitee;
And sixty yeer a wyflee man was hee,
And folwed ay his bodily delyt
On wommen, ther as was his appetyt...

lines 1 – 6

see: *epigram, stanza, sonnet*