You Must Know These Literary Terms and Critical Thinking Terms

A
1. **adage** – a familiar proverb or wise saying
2. **allegory** – a literary work with two or more levels of meaning: one literal level and one or more symbolic levels. The events, settings, objects or characters in an allegory stand for ideas of qualities beyond themselves. (*Everyman* is a play about, well, every man. Its protagonist is named Everyman.)
3. **alliteration** – the repetition of initial consonant sounds of several words in a group. It is often used in poetry to emphasize and to link words as well as to create pleasing, musical sounds. (“Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty/ Hills and bogs, bearing God’s hatred, Grendel came.” “from Beowulf”)
4. **allusion** – a reference to a well-known person, place, event, literary work or work of art. Allusions often come from the Bible, classical Greek and Roman myths, plays by Shakespeare, historical or political events and other materials authors expect their readers to know.
5. **ambiguity** – the intentional or unintentional expression of a word or idea that implies more than one meaning and usually leaves uncertainty in the reader – a statement that can contain two or more meanings.
6. **anachronism** – anything out of its proper time (an airplane in the *Odyssey*)
7. **anadiplosis** – repeating the end of a word of a clause as the beginning of the next one (“Pleasure might cause her to read, reading might cause her to know, knowledge might piety win, and piety grace obtain.”)
8. **analogy** – a comparison made between two objects, situations or ideas that are somewhat alike but unlike in most respects
9. **anaphora** – the deliberate repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of several successive verses, clauses, or paragraphs
10. **anecdote** – a brief story about an interesting, amusing or strange event
11. **antagonist** – a character or force in conflict with the main character (protagonist) in a literary work (In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Green Knight is the antagonist, who challenges Sir Gawain.)
12. **antecedent** - means going before or preceding. It is also a word, phrase or clause to which a relative pronoun refers.
13. **anticlimax** – often used deliberately for comic effect to create an ironical letdown, usually descending from a noble tone or image to a trivial or ludicrous one
14. **antihero** – a protagonist who lacks traditional heroic virtues and noble qualities and is sometimes inept, cowardly, stupid or dishonest, yet is also sensitive, honest, or otherwise commendable (Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*)
15. **antipathy** – a strong feeling of aversion or opposition
16. **antithesis** – a statement in which two opposing ideas are balanced; a figure of speech in which contrasting or paradoxical ideas are presented in parallel form (“To err is human, to forgive, divine.”)
17. **aphorism** – a general truth or observation about life, usually stated concisely and pointedly. It can be witty or wise. (Francis Bacon – “Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.”)
18. **apostrophe** – a speaker directly addresses an absent person or a personified quality, object or idea. It is often used in poetry and in speeches to add emotional intensity. (Percy Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” addresses the wind.)
19. **archetype** – an image, a descriptive detail, a plot pattern or a character type that occurs frequently in literature, myth, religion or folklore and is, therefore, believed to evoke profound emotions in the reader because it awakens a primordial image in the unconscious memory. Archetypes can be primitive and universal and consist of general themes like birth, death, coming of age, love, guilt, redemption, conflict between free will and destiny, rivalry among family members, fertility rites; of characters like the hero rebel, the wanderer, the devil, the buffoon; and of creatures like the lion, serpent or eagle.
20. **argument** – a set of logically related statements consisting of a conclusion and one or more premises. The premises are the reasons for accepting the conclusion. Argument can also refer to a brief summary, or synopsis, of a literary work.
21. **aside** – a brief speech in which a character turns from the person he/she is addressing to speak directly to the audience—a dramatic device for letting the audience know what he/she is really thinking or feeling as opposed to what he/she pretends to think or feel. (Macbeth speaking: “If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir.”)
22. **assonance** – the repetition of vowel sounds in stressed syllables containing dissimilar consonant sounds (Robert Browning – “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” The long “e” sound is repeated in “reach” and “exceed.”)
23. **asymptote** – the omission of conjunctions from constructions in which they would normally be used – speeds up the rhythm of the sentence (“I came, I saw, I conquered.”)

B
25. **ballad** – a song-like poem that tells a story, often one dealing with adventure or romance. Ballads often employ repetition of a refrain and four-line stanzas rhymed *abcb* with four feet in lines one and three and three feet in lines two and four:
   “O mother, mother make my bed.
   O make it soft and narrow.
   Since my love died for me today,
   I’ll die for him tomorrow.”
26. **black humor** – a substantial aspect of the Theatre (Drama) of the Absurd and of much modern fiction. The term describes sardonically humorous effects derived from mordant wit or grotesque situations that deal with anxiety, suffering or death. The tone is often one of resignation, anger or bitterness. *(Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*)

27. **blank verse** – unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse is the meter of most of Shakespeare’s plays. Think *duh DUH duh DUH duh DUH duh DUH.*

C

28. **caesura** – a natural pause or break in the middle of a line of poetry

29. **caricature** – a distorted or exaggerated portrayal of a person. It is used to ridicule personal flaws and general social failings. Although one thinks of caricatures as distorted drawings, caricature of characters appears in literature. *(Charles Dickens – Ebenezer Scrooge in *The Christmas Carol* and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations)*

30. **carpe diem** – a Latin phrase meaning “seize the day.” Many great literary works have been written with the carpe diem theme, urging people to live for the moment. *(Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”)*

31. **catharsis** – process by which an unhealthy emotional state produced by an imbalance of feelings is corrected and emotional health is restored. In literature, it refers to the audience’s emotional response to a tragic work. Catharsis is an emotional cleansing or expurgation.

32. **character** – a person or animal that takes part in the action of a literary work. *Major* characters are those who play important roles in a work; *minor* characters are those who play lesser roles. A complex character is considered a *round* character while a simple character is *flat.* A *dynamic character* changes throughout the work, but a *static character* remains the same.

33. **chiasmus** – the reversal of syntax or word order for effect (“Empty his bottle, and his girlfriend gone.”)

34. **clause** – a group of words containing a subject and its verb that may or may not be a complete sentence

35. **cliché** – a trite phrase that has become overused. Clichés are considered bad writing and bad literature. (“There’s no place like home.” “The check is in the mail.” “As easy as pie.”)

36. **climax** – usually the high point of interest or suspense in a literary work. It is the point at which the protagonist changes his or her understanding of the situation. Sometimes the climax coincides with the resolution, the point at which the central conflict is resolved.

37. **colloquial** – describes a word or phrase used every day in plain and relaxed speech but rarely found in formal writing, usually pertinent to a given area (“I hear tell that Jake got a new truck.” – southern slang)

38. **comic relief** – the feeling created by a humorous action or speech that appears within a serious work of literature. It is often used to emphasize, by contrast, the seriousness of the main action. *(the drunken porter in *Macbeth*; the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet)*

39. **conceit** – an unusual and surprising comparison between two very different things. This *extended metaphor* or *complicated analogy* is often the basis for a whole poem. It is also a whimsical, ingenious, way an object, scene, person, situation or emotion is presented in terms of a simpler analogue, usually from nature or a context familiar to author and reader alike. The *metaphysical poets* used conceit to startle the reader by showing a very exact correspondence between a thought or emotion and some particular aspect of a seemingly alien and inappropriate object. *(John Donne used a drawing compass to describe the bond between the soul of him and his mistress.)*

40. **conduplicatio** – Figure of repetition in which the key word or words in one phrase, clause, or sentence is/are repeated at or very near the beginning of successive sentences, clauses, or phrases; repetition of a key word over successive phrases or clauses. Note: Compare to *anadiplosis.* *(“This afternoon, in this room, I testified before the Office of Independent Council and the Grand Jury. I answered their questions truthfully, including questions about my private life – questions no American citizen would ever want to answer.” – William Jefferson Clinton)*

41. **conflict** – a struggle between opposing forces. The struggle can be internal, within the character. The struggle can be external—between the character and some outside force. The four types of conflict in literature are as follows: (1) man against man, (2) man against self, (3) man against nature and (4) man against society.

42. **connotation** – an association that a word calls to mind in addition to its dictionary meaning. *(Home and domicile have the same dictionary meaning, but home has positive and warm connotations while domicile does not.)*

43. **consonance** – the repetition of consonant sounds in stressed syllables containing dissimilar vowel sounds (“On a hot, hot day, and I in pajamas for the heat…” Note that the consonants are the same, but the vowels are different.)

44. **contrast** – the process of observing and pointing out differences

45. **convention** – any device or style or subject matter which has become, in its time and by reason of its habitual use, a recognized means of literary expression, an accepted element in technique. *(soliloquy associated with drama, simile with poetry, and catalog with the epic)*

46. **couplet** – a pair of rhyming lines written in the same meter. Shakespeare ended his sonnets with couplets. *(“So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” Sonnet XVIII – Shakespeare)*

47. **crisis** – in the plot of a story or play is the turningpoint for the protagonist and often coincides with the climax of the story

D

48. **denotation** – a word’s actual dictionary meaning as opposed to a word’s connotative meaning

49. **denouement** – in a literary work, anything that happens after the resolution of the plot. At this point the central conflict is resolved, and the consequences for the protagonist are already decided. It is the tying up of loose ends.

50. **diction** – word choice. Diction can be *formal* or *informal,* *abstract* or *concrete,* *plain* or *ornate,* *conventional* or *technical.* *(Archaic diction* refers to words that are no longer in everyday use.)*
51. **didactic** – instructiveness in a literary work, one of the purposes of which appears to be to give guidance, particularly
in moral, ethical or religious matters. Didactic literature (especially poetry) teaches moral lessons. (Chaucer’s “The
Pardoner’s Tale”)

52. **digression** – to stray from the main subject in speaking or writing

53. **dissonance** – harsh and inharmonious sounds that are discordant with the words and the rhythms surrounding them
in a line or sentence

54. **dramatic irony** – when there is a contradiction between what a character thinks and what the reader or audience
knows to be true (Oedipus is unaware that he killed his own father and married his mother, but the audience knows
the truth.)

55. **dynamic character** – a character who is different at the end of the book than he/she was at the beginning of the
book. The character has undergone changes and has matured greatly, usually learning harsh lessons along the way.
(Pip in Great Expectations or Scout and Jem in To Kill a Mockingbird)

56. **elegy** – a solemn and formal lyric poem about death, often in tribute to a person who has died recently. Most elegies
are written in formal, dignified language and are serious in tone. (Tennyson’s In Memoriam and Gray’s ”Elegy Written
in a Country Churchyard”) (elegiac is the adjective form)

57. **Elizabethan drama** – English comic and tragic plays produced during the Renaissance—during the last years of and
the few years after Queen Elizabeth’s reign. Thus, Shakespeare is an Elizabethan dramatist, although more than one-
third of his active career lies in the reign of James I who succeeded Queen Elizabeth I to the throne. Modern English
drama developed so rapidly and brilliantly that the Elizabethan Era is the golden age of English drama.

58. **ellipsis** – the omission of a word or phrase which is grammatically necessary but can be deduced from the context
(“Some people prefer cats; others, dogs.”) – A series of marks used in writing to show omission of words (“To be…that
is the question.”)

59. **end-stopped** – a line with a pause at the end. Lines that end with a period, comma, colon, semicolon, exclamation
point, or question mark are end-stopped lines.

60. **epic** – a long, narrative poem about the adventures of gods or of a hero. The epic usually presents an encyclopedic
portrait of the culture in which it was produced. (The Odyssey and Beowulf)

61. **epigram** – a brief, pointed statement in prose or in verse. It developed from simple inscriptions on monuments into a
literary genre—short poems or sayings characterized by conciseness, balance, clarity and wit. Epigrams are used for
many purposes, including the expression of friendship, grief, criticism, praise and philosophy. (from Alexander Pope’s
An Essay on Criticism – “Good nature and good sense must ever join; To err is human, to forgive, divine.” Oscar Wilde
was also an excellent epigramman.)

62. **epigraph** – is a quotation that appears at the beginning of a literary work. It usually introduces a motif or theme that
is developed in the work itself.

63. **epilogue** – the final part of a work of literature (except a play) completing and rounding it off; the opposite of preface

64. **epiphany** – a moment of sudden revelation or insight

65. **epistle** – Theoretically, an epistle is any letter, but in practice the term is limited to formal compositions written by an
individual or group to a distant individual or group.

66. **epitaph** – an inscription on a tomb or monument to honor the memory of a deceased person. It is also used to
describe any verse commemorating someone who has died. It may be serious or humorous.

67. **epithet** – a brief phrase that points out traits associated with a particular person or thing. Homer’s Iliad contains
many examples of epithets, such as the references to Achilles as “the great runner” and to Hector a “killer of men.”

68. **essay** – a short, nonfiction work about a particular subject. It can be formal or informal. It may be classified as
descriptive, narrative, expository, argumentative or persuasive.

69. **eulogy** – a formal piece of writing or an oration in praise of a person or thing; it has come to mean any general
expression of praise, but is most often a speech given at a funeral about the deceased

70. **euphemism** – a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when
referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing (“downsizing” is a euphemism for cutting jobs)

71. **euphony** – a term that denotes sounds pleasing to the ear; it is the opposite of cacophony

72. **expletive** – an interjection to lend emphasis; sometimes, a profanity

73. **exposition** – (1) lays the groundwork for the plot and provides the reader with essential background information.
Characters are introduced, the setting is described, and the major conflict is identified. Although the exposition
generally appears at the opening of a work, it may also occur later in the narrative. (2) Exposition is writing or speech
that explains, informs or presents information. Types of exposition include analysis, classification, comparison and
contrast, definition and exemplification.

F

74. **falling action** – is all of the action that takes place after the climax in a literary work. During this time, the conflict is
resolved, and the suspense decreases.

75. **farce** – a kind of comedy that features physical horseplay, stereotypical characters, and absurd plots, often involving
mistaken identities and recognition scenes. The writer of farce uses exaggeration, irony and witty dialogue to move his or
her audience to laughter. (Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew)

76. **figurative language** – writing or speech not meant to be interpreted literally. It creates vivid word pictures and makes
writing emotionally intense and concentrated (simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification, apostrophe, etc.).
117. **flashback** – a section of a literary work that interrupts the sequence of events to relate an event from an earlier time
118. **flat character** – a character who embodies a single quality and who does not develop in the course of the story
119. **foil** – a character who provides a contrast to another character, thus intensifying the impact of that other character (Laertes is a foil to Hamlet.)
120. **foreshadowing** – the use, in a literary work, of clues that suggest events that have yet to occur. Writers use this to create suspense or to prepare the audience for the eventual outcome of events.
121. **form** – the structure, shape, pattern, organization or style of a work—the way it is made. Form is different from content, which is what it is about. When applied to poetry, form refers to all the principles of arrangement in a poem—the ways in which the words and images are organized and patterned to produce a pleasing whole, including the length and placement of lines and the grouping of lines into stanzas.
122. **framework story or frame device** – a story within a narrative setting or framework, a story within a story. This is a convention frequently used in classical and modern writing (The Canterbury Tales, Frankenstein, and Wuthering Heights).
123. **free verse** – poetry which is not written in a traditional meter but is still rhytmical. (Walt Whitman’s poetry)

G
124. **gothic** – a term used to describe literary works that make extensive use of primitive, medieval, wild, mysterious, or natural elements. Traditional gothic novels are often set in gloomy castles where horrifying, supernatural events occur.
125. **grotesque** – characterized by distortions or incongruitities. The fiction of Poe is often described as grotesque. A grotesque can also be a character with distortions of appearance which emphasize ethical or behavioral abnormalities.

H
126. **heroic couplet** – iambic pentameter lines rhymed in pairs.
   “But when to mischief mortals bend their will,
   How soon they find fit instruments of ill.”
127. **hubris** – Greek – extreme pride. Hubris is a tragic flaw of pride, ambition or overconfidence that leads a hero to ignore warnings of the gods or to disregard established moral codes, resulting in the hero’s downfall. (Macbeth in Macbeth)
128. **hyperbaton** – A figure of speech that uses disruption or inversion of customary syntax to produce a distinctive effect; also, a figure in which language takes a sudden turn—usually an interruption. ("Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man." ~ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall." ~ Shakespeare)
129. **hyperbole** – a deliberate exaggeration or overstatement (I could sleep for a year. This book weighs a ton.) Macbeth, after murdering King Duncan, says, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?”

I
130. **iambic pentameter** – metrical poetry that consists of five iambic feet per line (iamb, or iambic foot, consists of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable – ex. “away” the “a” is unstressed and “way” is stressed) Milton – “How soon hath Time, the subtle thief o
131. **idiom** – an expression having a special meaning not obtainable or not clear from the usual meaning of the words in the expression (“fly off the handle” or “on pins and needles” or “raining cats and dogs”)
132. **imagery** – the descriptive language used in literature to recreate sensory experiences relating to sight, taste, touch, hearing and smell. Imagery enriches writing by making it more vivid, setting a tone, suggesting emotions and guiding the reader’s reaction.
133. **imperative** – constituting the mood that expresses a command or request
134. **implication** – a suggestion an author or speaker makes without stating it directly (NOTE: the author/sender implies; the reader/audience infers)
135. **inciting incident** – in a plot, it introduces the central conflict
136. **incongruity** – a juxtaposition of incompatible or opposite elements. (Pope’s The Rape of the Lock uses the formality of the epic style, but the subject centers on a lock of hair.)
137. **in medias res** – Latin for “in the middle of things.” When a narrative starts in medias res, the tale begins in the middle of the action.
138. **internal rhyme** – rhyme that occurs within a line, rather than at the end
Ex: “God save thee, ancient Mariner!
   From the fiends, that plague thee thus!
   Why look’st thou so?—With my crossbow
   I shot the Albatross.”
139. **inversion** – a reversal or change in the regular word order of a sentence
140. **irony** – is a contrast between expectation and reality, usually surprising the reader or viewer. The techniques of irony include hyperbole, understatement and sarcasm. Irony is often subtle and easily overlooked or misinterpreted.
   (1) **Situational irony** – occurs when a character or the reader expects one thing to happen but something else actually happens (Hardy’s “Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?”)
   (2) **Verbal irony** – occurs when a writer or character says one thing but means another (Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”)
   (3) **Dramatic irony** – occurs when the reader or viewer knows something that a character does not know (Lady Macbeth plotting King Duncan’s murder)
Guildenstern Are Dead

broad humor, or it may br

171
170
translate what the writer has said into equivalent words o
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16
161.

parallel elements may be words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs.  (Infinitives are repeated here.)

149
148
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143.

limited point of view – the knowledge of the storyteller is limited to the internal states of one character

144.

litotes – ironic understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary (“I shan’t be sorry for I shall be glad.”)

146.

lyric poem – a highly musical, emotional verse that expresses the observations and feelings of a single speaker.

Unlike a narrative poem, it presents an experience or a single effect, but it does not tell a full story. Types of lyrics include the elegy, the ode and the sonnet.

M

147.

malapropism – the mistaken substitution of one word for another word that sounds similar (“The doctor wrote a subscription.”)

148.

metaphor – a comparison between two unlike things without using “like” or “as.” “Time’s winged chariot” is a metaphor in which the swift passage of time is compared to a speeding chariot. An extended metaphor is one that is developed at length and involves several points of comparison. A mixed metaphor occurs when two are jumbled together (thorns and rain as in “the thorns of life rained down on him”). A dead metaphor is one that is overused.

149.

meter – the repetition of a regular rhythmic unit in poetry. Each unit of measure is known as a foot, consisting of one stressed syllable and one or two unstressed syllables.

150.

metonymy – a figure of speech that substitutes something closely related for the thing actually meant (“Just for a handful of silver he left us,” refers to money. The crown can be the king, the White House can be the government. “The pen [writing] is mightier than the sword [war/fighting].”)

151.

mood – or atmosphere, is the feeling created by a literary work or passage. Writers create mood through connotation, details, dialogue, imagery, figurative language, foreshadowing, setting and rhythm.

152.

motif – a recurring literary convention or element that is repeated within a literary work. A motif unifies a work and adds to its theme. (In Macbeth, references to blood, sleep and water form motifs in the play.)

153.

motivation – a reason that explains or partially explains a character’s thoughts, feelings, actions or speech.

154.

muses – Nine goddesses represented as presiding over song, the various departments of literature and the liberal arts. In literature, their traditional significance is that of inspiring and helping poets.

155.

myth – a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.

N

157.

narrative – writing that tells a story and is one of the major forms of discourse

158.

narrator – the one who tells the story; may be first- or third-person, limited or omniscient.

160.

non sequitur – a conclusion or statement that does not logically follow from the previous argument or statement.

O

161.

octave – first 8 lines of a sonnet (also can be called an octet)

162.

ode – a formal lyric poem with a serious theme. Odes often honor people, commemorate events, respond to natural scenes or consider serious human problems. (Percy Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”)

163.

omniscient point of view – when the storyteller’s knowledge extends to the internal states of all the characters. This all-knowing point of view provides access to all the characters’ motivations and responses to events that may be occurring simultaneously.

164.

onomatopoeia – use of words whose sounds echo their meanings, such as buzz, whisper, gargle and murmur

165.

overstatement – synonymous with hyperbole; an exaggeration.

166.

oxymoron – a combination of contradictory terms or ideas (“loving hate” in Romeo and Juliet)

P

167.

paradox – a statement that seems to be contradictory but that actually reveals some element of truth.

168.

parallelism – the repetition of a grammatical pattern to express ideas that are related or equal in importance. The parallel elements may be words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs. (“Is it wise / To hug misery / To make a song?” Infinitives are repeated here.)

169.

paraphrase – a restatement in different words. The point is to not alter the meaning of the words, but merely translate what the writer has said into equivalent words of one’s own.

170.

parenthetical – a comment that interrupts the immediate subject, often to qualify or explain.

171.

parody – imitates or mocks another work or type of literature. The purpose of a parody may be to ridicule through broad humor, or it may broaden understanding of or add insight to the original work. (Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is a parody of Hamlet.)
172. pathos — the quality in a literary work that arouses deep feelings of pity, sorrow or compassion in a reader or the audience (the murdering of Macduff’s family in Macbeth)
173. pedantic — characterized by an excessive display of learning or scholarship
174. persona — the “I” created by an author and through whom the author unravels perceptions of characters and events (Marlowe is Conrad’s persona in Heart of Darkness.)
175. personification — when a nonhuman is given human characteristics (Gray’s “Elegy…Churchyard” where “Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth” – the earth is personified.)
176. philippic or polemic — a strong verbal denunciation
177. plot — the sequence of events in a literary work. Two primary elements are characters and a conflict. A plot includes exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement (resolution).
178. point of view — the perspective from which a story is told. (1) First-person point of view is when the narrator is a character in the work and narrates the action as he/she perceives and understands it. (2) Third-person point of view is when the events and characters are described by a narrator outside the action. Third person omniscient point of view has the narrator all-knowing, seeing into the minds of more than one character. (3) Third-person limited point of view is when the narrator tells the story from the perspective of only one of the characters, so the reader learns only what that character thinks, feels, observes and experiences.
179. polysyndeton — the repetition of connectives or conjunctions in close succession for rhetorical effect (here and there and everywhere)
180. prosaic — having or using the style or diction of prose as opposed to the imaginativeness or originality of poetry (opposite of poetic)
181. protagonist — the central character in a story, novel or play. The protagonist is always involved in the main conflict of the plot and often changes during the course of the work.
182. pun — a play on words used to convey two meanings at the same time. (Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet — “Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man.” He has just been stabbed, and the pun is on the word grave, as he is dying.)

Q
183. quatrains — a four-line stanza, or unit, of poetry.

R
184. realism — refers to any effort to offer an accurate and detailed portrayal of actual life, often focusing on the middle or lower classes. Life is presented objectively and honestly, without sentimentality or idealism.
185. refrain — a regularly repeated line or group of lines in a poem or song
186. reliability — There are both reliable and unreliable narrators, that is, tellers of a story who should or should not be trusted. Most narrators are reliable (Conrad’s Marlow in Heart of Darkness), but some are clearly not to be trusted (Poe’s narrator in “Tell-Tale Heart”).
187. repetition — a technique in which a sound, word, phrase or line is repeated for emphasis or unity (used in Blake’s poems “The Lamb” and “The Tyger”)
188. resolution — when the conflict of a plot is ended
189. rhetoric — the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques; language designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect, but which is often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content. (All we get from politicians is empty rhetoric.)
190. rhetorical devices — literary techniques used to heighten the effectiveness of expression
191. rhetorical question — implies that the answer is obvious—the kind of question that does not need to be answered, used for persuading someone of a truth without argument or to give emphasis to a truth by stating its opposite ironically. Rhetorical questions are often used for comic effect as in Henry IV when Falstaff lies about fighting off eleven men single-handedly, then responds to the prince’s doubts, “Art thou mad? Is not the truth the truth?” On the other hand, Iago in Othello uses rhetorical questions for sinister ends, persuading Othello that his loving wife is a whore. Iago hints with questions (“Honest, my lord?” “Is’t possible, my lord?”)
192. rhyme — Words rhyme when the sounds of their accented vowels and all succeeding sounds are identical, as in amuse and confuse. For true rhyme, the consonants that preceded the vowels must be different. Rhyme that occurs at the end of lines of poetry is called end rhyme, as in Thomas Hardy’s rhyming of face and place in “The Man He Killed.” End rhymes that are not exact but approximate are called off rhyme, or slant rhyme, as in the words come and doom. Rhyme that occurs within a single line is called internal rhyme: “Give crowns and pounds and guineas,” A.E. Houseman.
193. rising action — where complications usually surface in the plot, causing difficulties for the main characters and making the conflict more difficult to resolve. As the characters struggle to find solutions to the conflict, suspense builds.
194. romance — a popular narrative form since the Middle Ages. Generally, the term refers to any imaginative adventure concerned with noble heroes, gallant love, a chivalric code of honor, daring deeds and supernatural events. Romances usually have faraway settings, depict events unlike those of ordinary life and idealize their heroes as well as the eras in which the heroes lived.
195. round character — a character who demonstrates some complexity and who develops or changes during the course of a work
sarcasm – a type of verbal irony that refers to a remark in which the literal meaning is complimentary but the actual meaning is critical. Sarcasm is the use of irony to mock or to convey contempt. (Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels – “You have clearly proved that ignorance, idleness, and vice are the proper ingredients for qualifying a legislator.”)

satire – writing that ridicules or holds up to contempt the faults of individuals or groups in order to incite change. Satire may be witty, mildly abrasive, or bitterly critical, and it often uses exaggeration to force readers to see something in a more critical light. Satire points out foibles (weakness or eccentricity in one’s character) and failings that are universal to human experience, in order to correct these flaws. (Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” proposes to alleviate the hunger in Ireland by eating the children.)

scapegoat – a person or group that bears the blame for another

setting – the time, place, and social atmosphere of the action of a short story, novel, play, narrative poem or nonfiction narrative. Setting may also include the moral environment that forms the background for a narrative. It is one of the main elements in fiction and often plays an important role in what happens and why.

simile – a figure of speech that compares two things that are basically unlike yet have something in common with the use of “like” or “as.” Whereas a metaphor only implies a comparison, a simile states it. Similes intensify emotional response, stimulate vibrant images, provide imaginative delight, and concentrate the expression of ideas.

solecism – nonstandard grammatical usage; a violation of grammatical rules (This is between you and I.)

soliloquy – a speech in a dramatic work in which a character speaks his or her thoughts aloud. Usually the character is on stage alone, not speaking to other characters and perhaps not even consciously addressing the audience. The purpose of the soliloquy is to reveal a character’s inner thoughts, feelings and plans. Soliloquies are characteristic of Elizabethan drama. (Hamlet’s “To be or not to be...” has him contemplating suicide.)

sonnet – a 14-line lyric poem focused on a single theme. It is commonly written in iambic pentameter. (1) Petrarchan or Italian sonnet was introduced into English by Sir Thomas Wyatt and is named after Petrarch, the 14th-century Italian poet. This sonnet consists of two parts: octave (first 8 lines) and the sestet (last 6 lines). John Milton’s sonnets are written in this form. (2) Shakespearean or English sonnet is sometimes called the Elizabethan sonnet. It consists of three quatrains (4-line units) and a final couplet. The rhyme is abab cdcd efef gg. The couplet provides a final commentary on the subject developed in the three quatrains.

speaker – in a poem, a speaker is like the narrator in fiction. The speaker is sometimes a distant observer and at other times intimately involved with the experiences and ideas being expressed in the poem. The speaker and poet are not necessarily identical. Often a poet creates a speaker with a distinct identity in order to achieve a particular effect. (In Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott,” the speaker is neutral and objective, as though merely recording observations. The speaker in Tennyson’s “Ulysses” is passionately involved in the ideas and feelings he is expressing as he, an aged hero, longs once more for adventure.)

stream of consciousness – a narrative technique that presents thoughts as if they were coming directly from a character’s mind. Instead of being arranged in chronological order, these events are presented from the character’s point of view, mixed in with the character’s ongoing feelings and memories. (Examples are the writings of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.)

structure – the way the parts of a literary work are put together. Paragraphs are a basic unit in prose, as are chapters in novels, acts and scenes in plays, and stanzas and lines in poems. A prose selection can be structured by idea or incident, like most essays, short stories, narrative poems, and one-act plays. Structure in poetry involves the arrangement of words and lines to produce a desired effect; a poem’s structure takes into account the sounds in the poem as well as the ideas. Structure usually emphasizes certain important aspects of content in prose or poetry. T.S. Eliot’s poem “Preludes” uses sections to shift between different times of day and between the interior of a room and the street outside. Analyzing structure is imperative for the AP exam.

style – the particular way in which a piece of literature is written. Style is not what is said but how it is said. It is the writer’s unique way of communicating ideas. Many elements contribute to style, including word choice, sentence length, tone, figurative language, use of dialogue and point of view. A literary style may be described in a variety of ways, such as formal, conversational, journalistic, ornate, poetic or dynamic. (In Elie Wiesel’s Night, the author uses simple words, short sentences, imagery and dialogue to convey his horrifying experiences.) Interpreting style is imperative for the AP exam.

subplot – a second plot within a story or play

symbol – a person, place, object or activity that stands for something beyond itself. Using night to represent death is a common symbol, and these types of symbols are often referred to as being conventional. Some symbols acquire their meanings within the contexts of the works in which they occur. (In Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner, the albatross symbolizes a burden one must bear.)

synecdoche – a figure of speech in which the name of a part is used to refer to a whole. (T.S. Eliot uses “muddy feet” in “Preludes” to refer to the early-morning crowds of people going to work.)

synesthesia – a form of imagery where one sensation is described in terms of another (“a loud color,” “a sweet sound”)

syntax – the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language
213. **tautology** – needless repetition which adds no meaning or understanding ("widow woman," “free gift”)

214. **theme** – a central idea or message in a work of literature. Theme should not be confused with **subject**, what the work is about. Rather, **theme is a perception about life or human nature** shared with the reader. Sometimes the theme is directly stated within a work; at other times it is implied, and the reader must infer the theme. (In Macbeth, themes include the corrupting effect of unbridled ambition, the corrosiveness of guilt, the lure and power of supernatural forces and the tragedy of psychological disintegration.) To discover theme, consider what happens to the central characters. The importance of those events, stated in terms that apply to all human beings, is the theme. In poetry, imagery and figurative language also help convey theme. (In Chaucer’s "The Pardoner’s Tale," what happens to the three young men illustrates the theme that "the love of money is the root of all evil.") A light work, one written strictly for entertainment, may not have a theme, or it may be a shallow or commonplace one.

215. **thesis** – the primary position taken by a writer or speaker. A thesis should always be stated as a sentence.

216. **tone** – an expression of a writer’s attitude toward a subject. Unlike mood, which is intended to shape the reader’s emotional response, tone reflects the feelings of the writer. The writer’s choice of words and details helps establish the tone, which might be serious, humorous, sarcastic, playful, ironic, bitter or objective. To identify the tone of a work, read the work aloud. The emotions conveyed in reading should give clues to the tone of the work. REMEMBER: **TONE** is set by the author. **MOOD** is the reader’s reaction. (Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” is searingly ironic. A humorous tone pervades Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead.*)

217. **tongue-in-cheek** – meant or expressed ironically or facetiously

218. **tragedy** – a dramatic work that presents the downfall of a dignified character who is involved in historically or socially significant events. The main character, or **tragic hero**, has a **tragic flaw** – a quality that leads to his/her destruction. A tragic hero evokes both pity and fear in readers or viewers; pity because readers or viewers feel sorry for the character, and fear because they realize that the problems and struggles faced by the character are perhaps a necessary part of human life. At the end of a tragedy, a reader or viewer generally feels a sense of waste because humans who were in some way superior have been destroyed. Shakespeare’s plays *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear* are famous examples of tragedies.

219. **trite** – overused and hackneyed (clichés are trite)

220. **understatement** – saying less than is actually meant, usually in an ironic way. Understatement is the opposite of hyperbole or exaggeration. One of the primary devices of irony, understatement can be used to develop a humorous effect, to create biting satire or to achieve a restrained tone. (An example is saying a flooded area is “slightly soggy.”)

221. **universality** – a term employed to indicate something timeless in a piece of writing that applies to all of humanity

222. **vernacular** – the ordinary language of the people living in a particular region. Many writers use vernacular to create realistic characters in an informal way. (Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* employs the vernacular of the people from the South.)

223. **voice** – the personality of the writer coming through on the page. It is what gives the writing a sense of flavor or uniqueness, and it is dictated by word choice, tone, and other authorial choices.

224. **zeugma** – two or more parts of a sentence are joined with a single common verb or noun. A zeugma employs both ellipsis, the omission of words which are easily understood, and parallelism, the balance of several words or phrases. The result is phrases joined or yoked together by a common and implied noun or verb. ("He carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men." ~ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*)

**ADDITIONS:**