

Some Important Literary Terms

Allegory:

Allegory is one of the figures of speech. Allegory is the use of concrete characters to represent abstract concepts or ideas. The central device of allegory is the personification of abstract ideas. The famous examples of allegory are Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Archetype:

It is the recurrent narrative designs, character-types and themes which are identifiable in a wide variety of literary works, as well as in myths.

Armagedden:

In St John's *The Revelation*, Armagedden is the site of the last great battle between good and evil before the Day of Judgment. As a result, it is referred to any great final struggle or conflict.

Blank verse:

It is unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Bourgeois tragedy (Domestic tragedy):

Bourgeois tragedy is also called domestic tragedy. It is written in prose and presented a protagonist from the middle or lower social ranks who suffers a commonplace or domestic disaster. George Lillo's *The London Merchant* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are typical examples.

Catastrophe:

It is the conclusion of a play, especially a tragedy. The catastrophe of *Oedipus the King*, for instance, is Oedipus's blindness and self-exile.

Chanson de geste:

It is "song of great deeds." It is a French type of medieval narrative poem; this kind of poem usually reflects chivalric ideals. *The Song of Roland* is a good example.

Christian humanism:

In the sixteenth century, most Renaissance humanists emphasize the dignity and central position of human beings

in the universe. However, these humanists are also pious Christians who incorporate the concepts and ideals inherited from pagan antiquity into the frame of the Christian creed. It is a synthesis of classical and Christian view. Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton belong to the tradition of Christian humanism.

Comedy:

1) Romantic Comedy:

Romantic comedy usually represents a love affair that involves a beautiful heroine; the course of this love does not run smoothly, but overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is an example of Romantic Comedy.

2) Satiric Comedy:

Satiric Comedy often ridicules political policies or philosophical doctrines, or attacks deviations from the social order by making ridiculous the violators of its standards of morals or manners. Ben Johnson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* are two examples of satiric comedy.

3) The Comedy of Humors:

It is a type of comedy developed by Ben Johnson, based on the ancient physiological theory of the "four humours." The humours are held to be the four primary fluids -- blood, phlegm, choler (or yellow bile), as well as melancholy (or black bile) -- whose mixture is held to determine a person's character type. An imbalance of one or another humour is said to produce four kinds of disposition, whose names have survived the underlying theory: sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic. In Johnson's comedy of humors -- such as *Every Man in His Humour*-- each of the major characters has a preponderant humor that gives him a characteristic distortion of disposition.

4) The Comedy of manners (Restoration Comedy):

The comedy of manners deals with the relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper-class society, and relies for comic effect on the wit of the dialogue -- often in the form of *repartee*, a witty conversational give-and-take which constitutes a kind of verbal fencing match. William Congreve's *The Way of the World* is a typical example.

Cosmic irony (or the irony of fate):

It is attributed to literary works in which a deity, or else fate, is represented as though deliberately manipulating events so as to lead the protagonist to false hopes, only to frustrate and mock them. This is a favorite structural device of Thomas Hardy. In his *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the heroine, having lost her virtue because of her innocence, then loses her happiness because of her honesty, finds it again only by murder, and having been briefly happy, is hanged.

Courtesy books:

It is a book on the character, obligations, and training of the man of the court. It sets up the ideal of the completely rounded or "universal" man, developed in all his faculties and skills, physical, intellectual, and artistic. He is especially trained to be a warrior and statesman, but is capable also as athlete, philosopher, artist, conversationalist and man of society.

Decorum:

It is the controlling idea of the Neo-classical period in Europe. It is a critical term describing what is proper to a character, subject, or setting in a literary work. The style of a literary work should be appropriate to the speaker and

the subject matter.

Dithramb:

Dithrymb is historically associated with Greek ceremonial worship of Dionysus. Originally, it is accompanied by music. It forms the model for the choral element in Greek verse, later developing into the finer quality in Greek tragedy.

Dramatic irony (tragic irony):

It is a situation in which a character in a play unknowingly says or does something in ironic contrast to the awareness possessed by the audience or author. Greek tragedian often employs this literary device. Sophocles, for instance, uses this device in his *Oedipus the King*. The following points are the situations of dramatic irony in *Oedipus Rex*. First, Oedipus's ruthless curse on the murderer of Liaus in public constitutes the first dramatic irony in the play. Oedipus utters the most severe damnation for the murderer. However, he himself is the guilty cause. Secondly, Oedipus's accusing Tiresias of the murder and laughing at the prophet's blindness constitutes another dramatic irony in the play. In fact, we know that Oedipus is the real criminal, and he will become a blind man at the end of the play. Thirdly, Jocasta's revelation of the past events to Oedipus is another ironic

situation in the play. Jocasta tells Oedipus that Liaus is killed by robbers, not by a single man and that Apollo's oracle is not true. However, we know that Apollo's oracle has been fulfilled. What is more, The news about Oedipus's origin brought by the Messenger from Corinth constitutes another dramatic irony. Attempting to please and comfort Oedipus, this messenger tells Oedipus that he is not the son of Polybus. However, this news leads to a tragic outcome. Finally, Oedipus's calling himself the "child of fortune" is another dramatic irony in the play. Actually Oedipus is not a "child of fortune," but a "victim of fate."

Electra complex:

In psychoanalysis, Electra complex is an obsessive attachment of a daughter to her father and thus it is the female counterpart of the Oedipus complex. This term gets its name from Electra, a daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who with her brother Orestes avenges the death of their father Agamemnon by killing their mother and her lover, Aegisthus.

Enlightenment:

In Europe, Enlightenment is a philosophical movement in the eighteenth century. This movement celebrates reason and the use of scientific method; it also celebrates man's ability

to perfect themselves and their society. The major champions of this movement are philosophers, who make a critical examination of previously accepted beliefs from the perspective of reason and with a confident faith in natural laws and universal order.

Epic:

Epic is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in an elevated style, and centered on a heroic figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. There are two kinds of epic: primary epic (or traditional epic or oral epic or folk epic) and literary epic (or secondary epic). Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the examples of oral epic. Virgil's *Aeneid* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* are two examples of secondary epic. The following points are the characteristics of epic. 1) The hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance. In the *Iliad*, he is the Greek warrior Achilles, who is the son of the sea nymph Thetis. 2) The setting of the poem is ample in scale, and may be worldwide. The scope of *Paradise Lost* is the entire universe, for it takes place in heaven, on earth, in hell and in the cosmic space between. 3) The action involves superhuman deeds in battle, such as Achilles' feats in the Trojan War. 4) In these great actions, the gods and other supernatural beings take an active part -- the Olympian gods

in Homer, and Christ and angels in *Paradise Lost*. These supernatural agents are called the **machinery** in the neoclassic age, in the sense that they are part of the literary contrivances of the epic. 5) An epic poem is narrated in a ceremonial and elevated style, which is deliberately distinct from ordinary speech. 6) The poet recounts the deeds of heroes with a measure of objectivity.

Epic conventions:

Epic is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in an elevated style, and centered on a heroic figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. Homer's the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Virgil's the *Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* are famous epics in Europe. The following points are the conventions of an epic. 1) The narrator begins by stating his epic theme, invoking a muse to inspire him in his great undertaking. In the *Iliad*, for example, Homer invokes Calliope -- the muse of epic poetry-- to inspire him. Invocation to the muse is very important for the epic poets. 2) The narrator of an epic often addresses to the muse the epic question, the answer to which inaugurates the narrative proper. 3) The narrative starts in medias res ("in the middle of things"), at a critical point in the action. Homer's *Iliad* starts with the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon, an event in the tenth year of the Trojan War. The

earlier action is given by flashback. 4) There are catalogues of some of the principal characters, introduced in formal detail, as in Milton's description of the precession of fallen angels in Book One of *Paradise Lost*. 5) An epic often employs stereotyped epithets, such as bolt-hurling Zeus, white-armed Hera, silver-footed Thetis, gray-eyed Athena. 6) The use of epic simile is one of the conventions of an epic. 7) The gods' intervention in human affair constitutes another convention of an epic. For example, In the *Odyssey*, Athena helps Odysseus kill the suitors of Penelope. 8) The use of elevated style and elevated diction is also another convention of an epic. 9) There are twenty-four or twelve books in most of the great epics. Homer's *Iliad* has twenty-four books; Virgil's *Aeneid*, twelve books.

Essay:

Essay is any short composition in prose that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, persuade us to accept a thesis on any subject, or simply entertain. There are two kinds of essay: formal essay and informal essay. The formal essay is impersonal and objective, such as Bacon's essays. In the informal essay (familiar essay), the author assumes a tone of intimacy with his audience and tends to deal with everyday things. The informal essay is personal and subjective, such as Montaigne's essays.

Existentialism(Existential Philosophy):

It is a philosophy centered on what it is to-be-in-the-world. This term can be applied to a group of attitudes current in philosophical, religious and artistic thought during and after World War II. Basically, the existentialist assumes that things have no meaning for us except we can create meaning through acting upon them. The existential point of departure is human beings' immediate awareness of situation. A part of this awareness is the sense they have of meaninglessness in the outer world. This meaninglessness produces a discomfort, an anxiety, a loneliness in face of human limitations, and a desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world, though efforts to act in a meaningless and "absurd" world lead to anguish, greater loneliness and despair. Each individual is totally free, but wholly responsible for what he makes of himself, for his being is defined by his choices and actions. The freedom and responsibility are the sources for human most intense anxiety. Satre's *No Exit* and Camus's *The Stranger (The Outsiders)* are two examples of the existentialist writings.

Freytag's pyramid (Dramatic structure):

It is a diagrammatic outline of the structure of a five-act

tragedy, given by a German playwright Freytag in his *Technique of Drama*. This pyramid has been widely accepted in analyzing the plot structure of both drama and fiction. In Freytag's pyramid, there are five elements: exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe (or denouement).

Gothic:

In general, the meaning of Gothic is "medieval". The eighteenth century neoclassicists consider it as 'barbaric' to indicate anything that offends the classic tastes: simplicity, dignity, and unity. The Romanticists, however, favor the Gothic; for them, it suggests whatever is medieval, natural, primitive, free, authentic, and romantic.

Great Chain of Being:

The conception of the Great Chain of Being is grounded in ideas about the nature of God, the First Cause. This worldview is prevalent in the Renaissance, but it is refined in the eighteenth century. In its comprehensive eighteenth-century form, the Great chain of Being is based on the idea that the essential "excellence" of God consists in his limitless creativity -- that is, in an unstinting overflow of His own being into the fullest possible variety of other beings. From this premise are deducted three consequences: plenitude,

continuity, and gradation. Plenitude means that the universe is absolutely full of every possible kind and variety of life. Continuity means that each species differs from the next by the least possible degree, and so merges all into the species most nearly related to it. Gradation means that the existing species exhibit a hierarchy of status, and so compose a great chain, or ladder, of being, extending from the lowliest condition of the merest existence up to God himself. In this chain, human beings occupy the middle position between the animal kinds and the angels.

Hamartia (tragic flaw):

Hamartia means tragic flaw. It is the frailty or error of judgment resulting from pride, arrogance, insolence and overconfidence.

Homeric epithet:

It is a stock word or short phrase applied to certain person or thing. For instance, "bolt-hurling Zeus," "white-armed Hera," "swift-footed Achilles" are Homeric epithet.

Homeric question:

The fact that the Greeks knew nothing about Homer has led some

modern scholars to question his existence altogether. These scholars contend that Homer never really lived but was invented to explain the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* after their origin had been forgotten. They also argue that these two epics are not the work of one poet, but of generations of poets, who gradually brought them into their present form by combining earlier poems, adding new materials, and reworking the whole.

Hubris:

It means excessive pride or overweening pride. Such pride results in the misfortune of the protagonist of a tragedy. It is one of the most common tragic flaws in Greek tragedy.

Humanism:

In the late fifteenth and early twentieth century, many **humanists** recovered, edited, and expounded many ancient texts in Greek and Latin. These **humanists** also wrote works concerned with educational, moral, and political themes, based largely on classical writers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero.

Typically, Renaissance humanism assumed the dignity and

central position of human beings in the universe; emphasized the importance in education of studying classical imaginative and philosophical literature, although with emphasis on its moral and practical rather than its aesthetic values; and insisted on the primacy of reason. Many humanists also stressed the need for a rounded development of an individual's diverse powers, physical, mental, artistic, and moral, as opposed to a merely technical kind of training.

Interior monologue:

It is a technique of stream of consciousness. It presents the unrestricted interior and inner experiences of the characters in a novel or in a short story. James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, for example, use the technique of interior monologue.

Invocation:

It means "to call." It is one of the epic conventions. In classical literature, epic convention demands an opening prayer to the Muse -- Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry -- for assistance in the writing. Epic poets often invoke supernatural help at the beginning of a poem before turning to its proper subject matter.

Metaphysical conceit:

It is the use of far-fetched comparison, and it is a highly ingenious kind of conceit. It is widely used by the metaphysical poets in the seventeenth century.

Mimesis (imitation):

Mimesis means imitation. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines poetry as an imitation of human actions. By "imitation," he means something like "representation," in its root sense: the poem imitates by taking an instance of human action and re-presenting it in a new material.

Myth:

It is an anonymous traditional story having roots in the primitive folk-beliefs of races or nations. The legend is told by father to son, and handed down from generation to generation.

Mythology:

Every country has its mythology. The most famous mythology includes the mythology from Greece, Rome, and Norse. Most of the mythologies attempt to explain creation, divinity, and

religion, to explore the meaning of existence and death, to account for natural phenomena, and to chronicle the adventures of national heroes.

New Comedy and Old Comedy:

The Old Comedy is a kind of classical comedy represented by Aristophanes; his *Lysistrata* is a well-known example. The Old Comedy often centers on extravagant fantasy, uninhabited obscenity, and pungent political and personal commentary. Such a Comedy is a product of Athenian democracy.

However, the conquest of Alexander, which ushers in the Hellenistic period, has resulted in huge changes in political conditions. The New Comedy of this period, known to us mainly through one complete play of the Greek poet Menander, reflects these conditions. New Comedy portrays daily life centered on family, with stereotyped situations and stock characters, such as the clever servant, young lovers, stodgy parents, and so on. Much of the art of New Comedy is to combine stock characters and plot elements into new mixtures.

Roman comic writers not only use these conventions; they also base each of their plays on a Greek comedy. Like his Greek models, Plautus presents typical characters responding in

very predictable ways to stereotyped situations. An astonishing range of characters populates his plays: affluent citizens, impecunious sons, slaves of both sexes, mercenary soldiers, prostitutes, pimps, cooks, quack doctors, and so on. These are caricatures of people who can be found in any Hellenistic Greek city or in Rome itself.

Noble savage:

It is the idea that primitive men are natural good and that whatever evil they develop is the product of civilization and society. The greatest impulse toward the doctrine of natural nobility comes from Rousseau's *Emile*: "Everything is well when it comes fresh from the hands of the maker; everything degenerates in the hands of man."

Novella:

It is a short tale in prose. In the fourteenth century Italy, there was a vogue for collections of such tales, some serious and some scandalous. The best form of these collections is Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

Oedipus Complex:

In psychoanalysis, it is a libidinal feeling that develops

in a child, especially a boy, between the age of three and six, for the parent of the opposite sex. This attachment is generally accompanied by hostility to the parent of the child's own sex. This term is named for Oedipus, a Greek king who kills his father and marries his mother.

Parable:

It is an illustrative story pointing out a moral or religious lesson. A parable is a short narrative about human beings presented so as to stress the tacit parallel, with a lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to his audience. The parable is one of Jesus' favorite devices as a teacher; examples are His parables of the good Samaritan and of the prodigal son.

Parody:

It is a composition imitating and burlesquing another texts or writings. It is designed to ridicule in humorous fashion.

Renaissance melancholy:

It is a strong sense of void, which paralyzes all aspiration to power or thirst for knowledge or delight in beauty.

Revenge tragedy:

It is also called the tragedy of blood. This type of play derived from Seneca's favorite materials of murder, revenge, ghosts, and mutilation. While Seneca relegates these bloody materials to long reports of offstage actions by messengers, the Elizabethan writers usually present these materials on stage to satisfy the appetite of the audience for violence and horror. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* is a good example.

Saga:

Saga means any traditional legendary and historical accounts of heroic achievement or marvelous adventure. *Beowulf* is the best example of saga.

Satyr play:

Satyr play is a kind of Greek Drama. It is the fourth and final play of tetralogy. It is called satyr play because the chorus is made up of goat-man called satyr. The satyr play is intended to bring comic relief after the previous three tragedies. It has the structure of a tragedy, subject matter from serious mythology, but is grotesquely comic.

Euripides's *Cyclops* is the only surviving satyr play.

Socratic method:

The term Socratic method comes from the name of a Greek philosopher: Socrates. Socrates devotes his life to the search for Universal Truth and absolute standard; he employs the method of questions and answers known as dialectic, through which he succeeds in exposing the illogicality of his opponents' positions. Socrates' ethics rests on an intellectual basis. He maintains that absolute standards can be discovered by a process of logical inquiry and supported by logical proof.

Sophists' methods:

In the late fifth century B. C., inside Athens, the Sophists appeared. In that time, democratic institutions had created a demand for an education preparing men for public life, especially the education of the art of public speaking. Such a demand was met by the appearance of the professional teachers, the Sophists. Their methods emphasized the view of effective presentation. They produced a generation trained to see both sides of all questions, to argue the weaker side as effective as the stronger, and to appeal to the individual advantages rather than to accepted moral standards. The methods mentioned above was best expressed in the following statement

of Protagoras, the most famous Sophists: "Man [human intelligence] is the measure of all things." In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, the tragic hero, Oedipus, was a typical figure who had great confidence in human reason.

Spirit of reverence:

In his speech, Pericles, the Athenian statesman, observes that "a spirit of reverence" pervades Athenian public acts; he sees it as the stabilizing factor in Athenian direct democracy. However, in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides (The first Greek critical historian) shows how his countrymen, in the long conflict with the Spartans, lose the "spirit of reverence."

Sprezzatura:

It is an Italian term. It means careless grace. It is a keyword in Castiglione's definition of ideal gentleman in his *The Courtier*.

Stream of consciousness:

Stream of consciousness is a narrative method in modern fiction. It is a phrase used to describe the unbroken flow of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings in the waking mind.

Examples of stream of consciousness novels include *The Remembrance of Things Past* written by a French modern novelist Marcel Proust, *Ulysses* written by an English modern novelist James Joyce, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* written by another English modern novelist Virginia Woolf, *The Sound and the Fury* written by an American modern novelist William Faulkner.

Stream of consciousness novel:

It is a kind of modern novel in the twentieth century. It deals with the unbroken flow of the stream of consciousness of its characters. Stream of consciousness novel usually undertakes to reproduce the full spectrum and continuous flow of a character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings, and free associations. Examples of stream of consciousness novels include *The Remembrance of Things Past* written by a French modern novelist Marcel Proust, *Ulysses* written by an English modern novelist James Joyce, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* written by another English modern novelist Virginia Woolf, *The Sound and the Fury* written by an American modern novelist William Faulkner.

Tetralogy:

Tetralogy is a unit of four works. In ancient Athens, tragedians had to submit four works--tetralogy--including three tragedies and a satyr play at a time in the dramatic competition. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (the only surviving ancient trilogy) and *Proteus*, for instance, are a tetralogy.

Theater of the Absurd:

The theater of the absurd views a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe. It also conceives the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning, and present human life -- in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning -- as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. Samuel Beckett is the most eminent writer in this mode. In his *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett presents two tramps in a waste place, fruitlessly and all but helplessly waiting for an unidentified person, Godot, who may or may not exist and with whom they sometimes think they remember that they may have an appointment; as one of them remarks, "Nothing happen, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." Like most works in this mode, this play is absurd in the double sense that it is grotesquely comic and also irrational and nonconsequential.

Three unities:

For literary critics, "the three unities" is the rules of writing plays. The three unities include the unities of action, time, and place. The unity of action means that the plot should be coherent, complete and whole. The unity of time means that the time presented in the play should be limited to one day only, preferably twelve hours. The unity of place means that the action presented in the play should be limited to a single location.

Tragicomedy:

It is a type of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama which intermingles both the standard characters and subject matter and the standard plot forms of tragedy and comedy. Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, for example, is a tragicomedy.

Transcendentalism:

It is a philosophical and literary movement in the nineteenth-century America. Its central exponents are Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson's *Nature* and "The American Scholar," and Thoreau's *Walden* are very famous writings about transcendentalism. Transcendentalism is a form of idealism. Transcendentalist movement emphasizes a reliance on the intuition. It is a faith in a divine "principle," or "Spirit,"

or "Soul," in which both humanity and the cosmos participate. Transcendentalist movement is also an ethics that stresses self-trust, self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

Trilogy:

Trilogy is a unit of three works. In ancient Athens, tragedians had to submit four works, tetralogy, consisting of three tragedies and a satyr play at a time in the dramatic competition. Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, for example, inclusive of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumendias*, is the only extant complete Greek trilogy. The theme of *Oresteia* is justice; but it emphasizes the social and historical development of justice -- from tribal justice to communal justice, from a tradition which demands that a murdered man's kin avenge his death, to a system requiring settlement of the private quarrel by a court of law. The new system of justice, which allows consideration of circumstances and motive, has finally replaced the inconclusive anarchy and individual revenge.

Vulgate:

The word "Vulgate" comes from Latin *Vulgus*, which means "common" or commonly used. *The Vulgate Bible* is the Latin version made by Saint Jerome in the fourth century. *The*

Vulgate Bible is the authorized Bible of the Roman Catholic Church while the *King James Bible* is the authorized version of Rome.

King James Bible:

Written in English, *King James Bible* is the authorized version of Bible in England.