Some Literary Terms Commonly Used

These elements are the tools of the writer which he/she uses much like a painter uses color, brush strokes, juxtaposition of elements to convey the message of the work. You will have to decide what elements are most significant and what they tell you about the work, i.e., how the author uses the elements to reveal his/her theme.

**Title**—The title of a work often serves a special function. It may indicate the nature of the work, for example, that it is tragic or comic or name the chief character or suggest the plot. It may have more than one level of meaning and should be examined carefully. It may even provide a clue to a meaning that is not initially obvious.

**Point of View**—This determines how much the reader can know of what is happening. It is the central consciousness of the character whose mind is that from which we perceive or view the events of the work.

- **First person narrator point of view**—the I, the character who tells the story. It is not necessarily the author. The author limits the information he/she conveys to this character’s scope of knowledge, degree of involvement and powers of observation and expression (consider when the narrator is a child). It may or may not be the main character.
- **Third person limited omniscient point of view**—the story is told as it is viewed and experienced by one of the characters, the only one the reader really gets inside of, the only one whose emotions and thoughts we are familiar with. Pronoun reference is she, she, it or they, although it may seem as though the story is told in first person.
- **Third person omniscient point of view**—the author reveals the innermost thoughts of all of the characters (or many of them). The author tells the reader anything she/she wants to reveal about characters or events—past, present or future. This narrator is thus all-knowing and knows everything there is to know about the characters—their thoughts, motives, actions, etc.
- **Third person objective point of view**—the reader is strictly an observer. As in real life situations we are permitted to see and hear the characters, but not permitted into the minds of any one of them. It is similar to watching them perform on a stage, with no narrative explanations provided about them. This mode is less commonly used in fiction.

**Plot**—Often the term is used interchangeably with action. Actually the terms differ. Actions refers to the series of events, to what happens; plot refers to what happens and why it happens. “The queen died; then the king died” is a statement of action. “The king died of grief after the death of the queen” is a statement of plot. Not just the events, but also the pattern of events and the relationship among those events make the plot. Plot is the convention of imposing order on the chaos of events that is real life.

**Conflict**—Plot must have conflict to truly be a plot. Conflict is the struggle among two of more opposing forces and provides the elements of interest and suspense. The protagonist may be involved in four different kinds of conflict: 1) between him/herself and the forces of nature; 2) between him/herself and another character, the antagonist usually; 3) between him/herself and society as a force; 4) between two or more aspects of his/her own personality. A work may contain one or several of these types of conflicts.

**Climax/Crisis/Turning Point**—The point in the action of greatest emotional intensity or at which the opposing forces interlock in a decisive action upon which the plot will turn (i.e., the turning point of the plot). Some consider this the point at which the end becomes inevitable. Some critics consider the climax the point of maximum intensity and the crisis the turning point in the action; taking this definition, the climax and the turning point do not always occur together.
**Catastrophe/Denouement**—The conclusion of a play, particularly a tragedy; the final stage of the falling action (movement of play from crisis to this point) and the winding up of the plot. Denouement implies not only the outcome (happy or sad) of the main situation but an explanation of all the secrets and misunderstandings connected with plot complications. Though denouement may be applied to both comedy and tragedy, catastrophe is the term most commonly applied to tragedy.

**Allusion**—A brief reference, usually indirect, to a person, place, event, or other literary work. It taps the knowledge and memory of the reader/viewer and, thereby, builds an intellectual and emotional response from associations already existing in the reader’s mind. Some allusions are clear to most readers; some are topical or dependent on knowledge few readers have.

**Atmosphere**—The prevailing emotional aura of a work. Often the atmosphere is established by the setting or key images.

**Theme**—A story must have a purpose, a theme or message or moral, which may be explicitly stated on rare occasions, but more often is only suggested or implied. A theme gives coherence and meaning to the work; everything in the work helps convey this theme. With longer works, several themes may exist simultaneously.

**Setting**—The environment of the events of a story, the immediate world in which they occur. The reader must know where geographically (location, town, country) the story is taking place and when (historically, seasonally, etc.).

**Tone**—The author’s attitude toward his/her subject, characters or realities. It is the tone of voice spoken in. It may be light, comic, romantic, ironic, dreamlike, serious, or impassioned among others.

**Style**—The author’s manner of expressing him/herself. It is the way he/she uses language, rhythm, sentence length, subtlety, humor, concreteness, complexity, difficult language, dialogue or descriptive detail.

**Foreshadowing**—Hints or clues; a shadow of things to come. May be indicated by a word, phrase or sentence, usually early in the story, to indicate what is going to occur. Stimulates reader interest, adds suspense and helps prepare the reader for the outcome.

**In medias res**—Beginning a work in the middle of the action and then supplying information about the beginning through devices of exposition—often a prologue or some character filling in the information.

**Structure**—The overall organization of literary work and the way in which it is put together. Many contemporary works appear to be without structure, but this lack of structure is purposeful and often reinforces a theme.

**Symbol**—Something that is itself and also stands for or suggests something else. The river in *Huckleberry Finn* is literally the Mississippi River but also symbolizes the flow of life and experience. Thus, a symbol is an object or an image that evokes a concrete reality that in turn evokes other levels of meaning. The symbol does NOT, however, “stand for” the meaning, but the meaning is suggested by the object or image. Symbolism in fictions has three usual effects: 1) it appears during an important moment of the work to underline the significance of that moment, 2) it is repeated several times to remind us of some constant element in the work or 3) it
recurs in varying contexts to help define or clarify the theme. The usual clue that a detail is symbolic is that it is conspicuous for some reason other than factual importance.

**Imagery**—The concrete representation of a sensory experience of an object. Imagery is the collection of images. Pattern of images affect the atmosphere of a work, and, in the hands of a fine writer, they deepen the characterizations and relate to the theme.

**Irony**—A broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from the appearance that masks it. Irony is used to describe a writer’s recognition of incongruities and his/her use of them. **Dramatic irony** is the words or acts of a character that carry meaning unperceived by the character but understood by the audience. Usually the character’s own interests are involved in a way he/she cannot understand. The irony lies in the meaning intended by the speaker and the significance seen by others. When Mark Twain makes the following statement about his father, his real meaning is quite different from his surface meaning. “When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” **Verbal irony** is when the actual intent of the speaker is opposite of what she/she says. It differs from sarcasm in that it is usually less harsh in its wording though its effect is more cutting. **Understatement** and **hyperbole** (exaggeration used to heighten the effect of something) are qualities of much verbal irony.

**Characters**—The “people” in a dramatic or fictional work. A good writer gives the characters motivations that are consistent with their personalities so that the characters move the plot (rather than the plot moving the characters). **Flat character**—a character with no real dimension or individual characteristics or one developed around a single characteristic or quality. **Round character**—a character with enough individuality to surprise the reader. They are usually dynamic and change during a work as a direct result of the action or situations. **Protagonist** is the chief character, the one we care most what happens to, the one who has to make the choices and who faces the conflict. It is a more correct term than hero because a protagonist does not have to be an heroic character. **Antagonist** is the character or force (including an inner force) directly opposed to the protagonist or a rival or opponent of the protagonist. **Confidant/condidante**—a character who has little effect on the action but in whom the protagonist or some other major character confides. **Foil**—a character who, by contrast, underscores or enhances the distinctive characteristics of another character (usually the protagonist). (Literally, a foil is a piece of bright metal that is placed under jewelry to enhance its brilliance. Likewise, the foil sets off the characteristics of the protagonist.)

**Comedy**—A work with a happy ending. It is a lighter form of drama and aims primarily to amuse. It differs from farce by having a more sustained plot, more subtle and significant dialogue, more natural characters. However, the lines between the various types of comedy and between comedy and tragedy are not always sharply defined. Comedy often depends on incongruity and exaggeration to achieve its effects. Comedy often deals with people of lower position (dukes and courtiers) and in their more natural states (dealing with domestic issues, for example), whereas tragedy often deals with people of very high social position (kings and princes) and in a more idealized state.

**Farce**—A dramatic piece intended to excite laughter more through gags, exaggeration, coarseness and slapstick than through characterization or plot.

**Tragedy**—Traditionally, a drama that recounts an important and causally related series of events in the life of a person of significance. Tragedy tends to depict people in terms of their godlike
potential, their ideals, their struggle, not only with the implacable universe, but also with their own frailties. It can be said to differ from comedy in that tragedy records human striving and aspirations, whereas comedy amusingly depicts people’s limitation and weaknesses.

**Tragic flaw**—The flaw, error or defect in the tragic hero or protagonist that leads to his/her downfall. **Hubris**—the particular form of tragic flaw that results from the protagonist’s excessive pride, ambition or overconfidence. Hubris causes the protagonist to break a moral law, attempt to transcend normal human limitations, or ignore a divine warning, any of which leads to his/her downfall.