ESSENTIAL LITERARY TERMS

A BRIEF NORTON GUIDE WITH EXERCISES

SHARON HAMILTON

Essential Literary Terms

A Brief Norton Guide With Exercises

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Preface

Many students in introductory literature courses are instinctively able to sense the effect of a poem or story: to say if it is uplifting or depressing, satirical or serious, dull or riotous. They can tell whether a character is good or evil, conflicted or self-righteous, unpredictable or conforming. What is not instinctive—what must be taught—is *how* a writer creates these effects, the techniques that he or she uses to convey ideas and to elicit responses from the reader. *Essential Literary Terms: A Brief Norton Guide with Exercises* defines and explains the most essential of those techniques in clear, straightforward prose, providing along the way numerous examples and exercises to help students develop and test their understanding. With its emphasis on application—how writers use these techniques and how students can identify and analyze them—*Essential Literary Terms* guides introductory students to a more sophisticated understanding of literature.

On the most basic level, students need to learn the major ways that the style of fiction and poetry differs from that of ordinary prose. The most workaday prose—for example, a manual for operating an appliance or a description of the early signs of a heart attack—is generally composed of literal statements intended to inform or explain. Other kinds of writing fall on the continuum between workaday prose and literature, borrowing devices common to literary style to persuade as well as inform. Examples include political speeches, ads, and editorials.

Another way of describing the distinctions is that literature is comprised not simply of literal statements but also of implied perspectives on such statements, and of nuances in their meaning. In literature, how something is said is crucial to what it means. The old dictum defines poetry as the genre in which style is inseparable from content; the same might be said of fiction and drama. Good readers recognize that meaning resides in form as well as content, but they must be encouraged to identify and explain their perceptions, to go back to a piece that they have responded to instinctively and look for the elements that influence the overall effect. It is in the nuances, the subtext created by word choice, structure, rhythm, and sound, that full meaning resides.

Literary terms have emerged over the ages in order to describe such elements; an understanding of those terms, therefore, is crucial to a deep, critical response to literature. They not only provide a common vocabulary for discussing poetry and fiction, but also help students to see patterns, to get past a superficial "I like it" or "It's funny" response and begin to divine the art behind the work. A good understanding of literary terms can encourage students to categorize and to compare, which is the essence of critical thinking. Once introduced to the concept of metaphor, for example, students have a basis for understanding how one poet's use of it differs from another's; or, once they learn to identify a sonnet, they are prepared to see how that poetic form can serve multiple subjects and express totally disparate tones. Finally, another purpose of this guidebook is to provide a sense of heritage by presenting the major techniques and approaches with which authors and informed readers have written and read books in the past.

Most books that define literary terms are erudite and encyclopedic. *Essential Literary Terms* instead aims for brevity, clarity, and selectivity. It covers the literary terms that are most likely to benefit introductory students and provides a clear and substantial explanation of each one. Students and teachers can turn to the guidebook for an understanding of key terms needed to read and analyze the classics and their modern heirs. At the same time, with carefully chosen examples accompanying each entry, *Essential Literary Terms* offers more than dictionary-style definitions. Students are encouraged to identify and discuss, for instance, how a poetic line offers an example of alliteration and why the use of that device matters to the line's meaning. In other words, the purpose of each entry is to go beyond simply assigning a label—the what—to speculate on the how and the why.

The study of the terms is reinforced by exercises that both test and augment the student's understanding of and ability to apply the terms in context. The exercises are in three tiers. The first tier focuses on brief passages and asks students to explain how each passage uses a particular device, as well as how that device affects the line's meaning and literary effect. The second, more complex tier asks students to identify and analyze several different literary devices in a longer passage. The third, culminating tier is a set of poems and prose passages for which students are asked to analyze the literary

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elements, and are given suggestions about matters to address in their responses. In order to help students reference lines in their answers to the exercises, the editors have numbered the long passages of poetry according to the lines quoted. That is, the numbers begin with 1 for the first line of the excerpt rather than with the line number that would apply to the entire poem. A pamphlet of answers to the exercises is available to instructors on request.

Like any complex skill, critical analysis comes to seem graceful and fluid only after long practice. In the learning, it must be broken down into its component parts and practiced in stages, then reassembled into a fluent whole. The exercises in *Essential Literary Terms* give students practice in identifying the techniques that are key to understanding the tone and meaning of any literary passage. In addition, the analyses of passages that accompany the explanations serve as models, offering students examples of how the terms may be used in writing focused, precise, and detailed literary analysis. For instructors, the book presents such material in organized, easily accessible form, and so can serve as a systematic reminder of information and skills that they will want their students to master.

Essential Literary Terms is designed for quick and easy reference. Terms are grouped topically, beginning with those that are broadly applicable to imaginative writing in all genres (Literary Forms, Figurative Language, Rhetorical Strategies), then moving to topics that are more specific to prose (Narration, Structure, Syntax), and then to those that are more specific to poetry (Meter, Rhyme, Sound and Sound Patterns, and Poetic Forms). Within these groupings, terms are arranged to help students see patterns and connections. A reader may look up either an individual term, like **simile**, or an entire group of terms—for example, all the entries under the category **figurative language**. If one term is more prominent or accessible than the others, it is listed first. For example, the most easily understood category of **figures of thought**, **simile**, is given first, followed by the related, more complex class, **metaphor**. Those major **tropes** are followed by such subsets as **personification** and **synecdoche**. If two terms are related—for example, **couplet** and **tercet**—the table of contents lists them in consecutive order. If no order of importance applies, as in the terms associated with **structure**, the listing within the category is alphabetical. The one exception to this arrangement is Prosody, the section on **meter**, which is clearest if read as a

whole, although each term can still be studied on its own. The discussions of individual terms also cross-reference related terms, which are indicated by SMALL CAPITALS. An index in the back of the book allows students to locate a particular term quickly.

An essential part of academic writing is understanding the conventions for documenting sources. The documentation style set by the Modern Language Association has long been the standard for literature and humanities students, and *Essential Literary Terms* includes a brief but comprehensive guide to MLA style. Both in-text documentation and works-cited entries are treated with clear explanations and examples. A sample student paper showcases how documentation is used within an essay; it also gives students a full-length example of the type of literary analysis that they will do in their courses.

Essential Literary Terms benefits from a long and rich heritage. Authors have employed these literary concepts and techniques for thousands of years, before literature had even assumed a written form, to convey the worlds of their imaginations. For nearly as long, scholars, feeling the need to order and describe their responses to that art, have labeled, classified, and analyzed these concepts and techniques. For those who wish to study a larger set of terms than this book provides, inclusive literary dictionaries abound. Meanwhile, this book will offer students the chance not simply to memorize literary terms but to apply them in context, and to explore ways in which knowledge of how they work can clarify tradition and enrich meaning. Ultimately, *Essential Literary Terms* is meant as a means to ends that go beyond the classroom: to enhance literary sensibility and to foster skills that can lead to a lifetime of critical and pleasurable reading.

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Literary Forms

Imaginative literature may be divided into three major **literary forms**: POETRY, FICTION, and DRAMA. POETRY is usually categorized into three main types: EPIC, DRAMATIC, and LYRIC. All three subcategories share such common traits as specific patterns of RHYTHM and SYNTAX, frequent use of FIGURATIVE language, and emphasis on the effects of the arrangement of the words on the page. Although some works of FICTION and DRAMA also display many of these traits, they are particularly characteristic of POETRY.

FICTION is, broadly speaking, any NARRATIVE about invented characters and events, whether in VERSE or prose. The narrower meaning of the term, however, refers to works written in prose. The major genres of fiction are the **novel**, the **short story**, and the **novella**.

DRAMA differs from POETRY and FICTION in that it does not typically contain a NARRATOR and is usually intended for performance. The form may be divided into the broad categories of COMEDY and TRAGEDY, each of which contains several subcategories, such as ROMANTIC COMEDY or CLASSICAL TRAGEDY. A third and smaller category, TRAGICOMEDY, combines features of each of the major genres.

DRAMA

Drama (from the Greek verb for "to do" or "to act") is the major LITERARY FORM that presents characters directly to the audience, usually without the intermediary of a NARRATOR. Most drama is written to be performed in the theater by live actors, who speak the DIALOGUE and move in accordance with the STAGE DIRECTIONS written by the **playwright**—literally, the maker of the **play**, the term for an individual **dramatic** work. The exception to that mode of presentation is **closet drama**, which is intended to be read rather than performed. ("Closet" is an antiquated term for "study" or "private chamber.") Some examples of closet drama are John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671) and Lord Byron's *Manfred* (1817).

Drama is classified according to the effect intended on the audience, as well as the choice and rendering of the materials in order to achieve that effect: The broadest division is that between COMEDY and TRAGEDY, but these broad categories also contain specialized subgroups.

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