Literary Devices

When you prepare to write your own analysis, keep in mind that authors use specific tools, often called “literary devices” or “poetic devices” when writing. Identifying these devices can help you form and support your thesis, but make sure to use **specific examples from the text** to back up your ideas. Also, do not forget to cite these supporting examples (if you don’t, it is considered plagiarism!!) Check out the brief list of common literary devices and their definitions below.

- **Allegory** - A symbolic narrative in which the surface details imply a secondary meaning. Allegory often takes the form of a story in which the characters represent moral qualities. *(Harry Potter is an allegory for the dangers behind the idea of “racial purity.”)*
- **Alliteration** - The repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. Alliterations are used to add character to the writing and often add an element of fun to the piece. *(e.g. Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers)*
- **Analogy** - An analogy is a literary device that helps to establish a relationship based on similarities between two concepts or ideas. By using an analogy, we can convey a new idea by using the blueprint of an old one as a basis for understanding. With a mental linkage between the two, one can create understanding regarding the new concept in a simple and succinct manner. Analogies often take the form of a *simile* (Her face turned as red as a beet) or a *metaphor* (The hot classroom was an oven).
- **Character** - An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change).
- **Characterization** - The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions. *(Luke Skywalker is the major hero character in Star Wars. He goes through quite a few changes that are reflected in his wardrobe. He begins the films as an entirely good character, dressed in all white, and ends up in black with white showing at the end, which shows his struggle against the Dark Side of the Force and his ultimate choice to remain on the side of Light.)*
- **Conflict** - A struggle between opposing forces in a story or play, usually resolved by the end of the work. The conflict may occur within a character as well as between characters.
- **Diction** - The selection of words in a literary work. A work’s diction forms one of its centrally important literary elements, as writers use words to convey action, reveal character, imply attitudes, identify themes, and suggest values.
- **Foil** - A character who contrasts and parallels the main character in a play or story. *(The level-headed, stable, and collected character Dr. Watson is a foil for the brilliant but chaotic, single-minded Sherlock Holmes.)*
- **Image** - A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea. Imagery is anything that evokes the five senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, or sound. Imagery can add a lot to a story by giving the reader a particular feeling. *(Starting a scary story with “It was a dark and stormy night,” is visual and audible imagery that makes the reader immediately feel anxious and ill at ease.)*
- **Plot** - The unified structure of incidents in a literary work. *(a.k.a. the storyline and the order in which events take place)*
- **Theme** - The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. *(The Hunger Games series deals with themes of dystopian societies, inequality, human rights, as well as love, friendship and loyalty.)*

Content adapted from literary-devices.com and the McGraw-Hill Online Learning Center’s Glossary of Fiction Terms.

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