The Writing Center @ JSCC
Literary Terms

When you write or talk about literature, you will need to use literary terms. In this handout, you'll find a list of some common terms, with definitions. If you come across a term in this handout or in your readings that is not on this sheet, be sure to look it up in the dictionary.

Abstract (vs. concrete) – descriptions of ideas or of general qualities of people or things; *concrete* refers to specific ideas, qualities, people, or things. For example, the statement "Omar loves Sally" is concrete; the statement "Love is a feeling most people crave" is abstract.

Alliteration – the repeating of a specific sound. For example, in "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers," the sound /p/ is repeated 8 times and the sound /k/ is repeated 3 times. Alliteration can be used to evoke images in the reader. For example, the /s/ sounds in this passage about the sea in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* might make you think of the sounds the ocean makes: "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude."

Antagonist (vs. protagonist) – the character in a story who works against the hero. Sometimes, but not always, the antagonist is the villain, or the "bad guy." For example, in the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella*, Darth Vader in the old *Star Wars* movies, and the narrator's mother in Amy Tan's *Two Kinds* are all antagonists, even though some (like Tan's narrator's mother) are not villains.

Author (vs. Narrator) – the person who wrote the piece. The author is usually not a character in the piece. Do not confuse the main character or narrator with the author, even if the piece is autobiographical.

Character – a figure in a work of literature, human or non-human. Romeo is a character in *Romeo and Juliet*; the rabbits are characters in *Watership Down*. The important element for non-human entities to be considered characters is that they have human characteristics. Characters may be static, which means they do not change much during the story, or dynamic, which means they do change – for better or worse – during the story. They may also be flat, which means that they are defined by only one trait, or round, which means that they are more complex, like real people.

Characterization – the ways an author develops the characters in a work. An author uses *direct characterization* when s/he explicitly tells you something about the character. An author uses *indirect characterization* when s/he shows, or reveals, something about the character. For example, an author could express that a character is a basketball player either by writing the words "Pat was a star on the basketball team" or by describing the sneakers and uniform Pat wears, the sweat that drips from Pat's forehead, or the locker-room that Pat changes clothes in. Characterization is a job for an author, and you should *think* about how an author gets you to think what you do about a character.

Cliché – a saying, description, or phrase that has been so overused that it becomes almost meaningless. Examples include "under the weather," "love is like a red rose," and "don't go there." Avoid clichés in your writing.

Climax – the point of the story where the action comes to a peak. It might be the turning point of the story. All earlier action leads up to the climax (called the **rising action**), and all following action fades (called the **falling action**).

Comedy (vs. tragedy) – in general, a story with a happy ending; usually focuses on everyday people in common language.

Concrete – See *abstract*.

Conflict -- the struggle within the story. Without it, there is no story. Conflict usually comes in four categories: physical, social, internal/psychological, or metaphysical – character against character, character against society, character against nature, character divided against self, character against God. For example, in the *Harry Potter* series, Harry's physical conflict is with Lord Voldemort; his social conflict is with the students at Hogwarts and other wizards who think he is lying about Lord Voldemort; and his internal conflict happens when he wonders whether he himself is good or evil.

Dialogue – conversation between characters in a story. Quotation marks usually signal dialogue, and readers imagine that the words are coming straight from the characters' mouths.

Flash-back/-forward – a scene that interrupts the action of a story. A flashback moves back in time to reveal an event that happened earlier. A flashforward moves ahead in time to reveal what will happen later. The movie *Pulp Fiction* uses both flashback and flashforward throughout the story. Usually, events shown in a flashback or flashforward are significant to the character's actions or decisions in the story's present.

Genre – the classification of a work based on its content, form, or style. Some genres include **prose/ poem/fiction/drama; comedy/tragedy/satire/romance; and autobiography/essay/novel.**

Imagery – the language an author uses to create a visual picture for readers. Also, the use of figures of speech, like simile, personification, and many more, to express abstract ideas. Imagery may be literal or figurative. **Literal imagery** uses words that appeal to the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch). For example, you might describe a fish using literal imagery like "slippery," "flopping," or "cold." **Figurative imagery** uses sensory details, but to describe something other than what they would normally evoke. For example, you might describe the feeling that comes after you get bad news as a cold chill sliding down your spine, making your stomach flop around your gut – like a dying fish.

Irony – a contradiction between appearance (or expectation) and reality. If someone says one thing but actually means another, when someone expects something to happen and something else actually happens, when one thing appears to be true and something else is actually true, the author is using irony. Irony is not used simply when something bad or unexpected occurs. Expectation or appearance is key to irony. For example, in *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus vows to find the man who murdered the former king, only to learn later what we know all along: that Oedipus himself is the murderer.

Narrator – a character created by the author to tell the story to the readers. The narrator may be a named character in the story, or s/he may be "invisible," watching and describing the characters' actions, thoughts, and feelings without interacting with the characters at all. When the story is told by someone who uses "I" or "me," you have a first-person narrator; when it is told by someone who uses characters' names and knows everything each is thinking, you have a third-person omniscient narrator; when it is told by someone who knows only what the characters see.

Plot (vs. theme) – the arrangement of events in a story, usually including causes of events. The plot might not be chronological in real time (see flashback). Conflict plays a central role in the plot. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the plot involves Harry's learning that he is a wizard, his arrival at Hogwart's, his adventures at the school, and his fight with Lord Voldermort. See theme for a contrast with plot.

Point of View – the perspective from which the story is told. First-person point of view (POV) uses a narrator who refers to him-/herself as "I." Often, a first-person narrator is limited to his or her own experiences and thoughts who must assume the feelings, thoughts, or reactions of other characters, so first-person narrators may be unreliable or naive. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is an example of a novel written in first-person POV. Second-person POV is very rare, and it uses a narrator who refers directly to the reader as "you." Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* is an example of a novel told through second-person narration. Third-person POV is very common, and it uses a narrator who is separate from the action of the story, using "he" or "she" to refer to the characters. Third-person narrators may be either omniscient or limited. Omniscient narrators are all-knowing, so they can do more than just tell the story: they can go into the minds of each character to reveal what each character is thinking and feeling. Limited narrators tell the story through the eyes of only one or a few characters. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is an example of a story told by a third-person, omniscient narrator. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* is an example of a story told by a third-person, limited narrator.

Protagonist – the most important, or "main," character of a story, usually the hero. The protagonist struggles against the sometimes-evil antagonist, and this struggle makes up the central conflict of the story, or the plot. Cinderella is the protagonist of *Cinderella*. Luke Skywalker is the protagonist of *Star Wars*.

Satire – a genre that uses wit, irony, and sarcasm to expose flaws in human nature or in society's behavior. Satire may be funny and may have a happy ending, but it differs from comedy. Comedy's purpose is mainly to entertain; satire's purpose is usually to teach some moral lesson. For example, Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is a satire that sarcastically proposes a solution to Ireland's overpopulation and poverty problem – shipping Irish babies to England as food for English aristocrats. *The Daily Show* is a satire of nightly news programs.

Setting – the place, time, and historical context that a story takes place.

Symbol – something in a story that stands for something larger or more complex. For example, the U.S. flag is a symbol that represents the values and people of the United States. In *Jaws*, the shark may have served not only to frighten the characters in the film but also to represent the fear of unknown, unseen dangers in human nature.

Theme – the statement that a story seems to be making about its subject. (See plot.) In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the themes include the importance of friendship and the value of teamwork to solve overwhelming problems.

Tone – the attitude the author seems to have about the reader or characters. The tone might be serious, sarcastic, angry, apologetic, commanding, and so on.

Tragedy – a serious, sometimes gloomy story, usually focused on upper-class characters or royalty, that often ends in disaster and death. Usually, the main character has a specific flaw, like pride (*hubris*) or dishonesty, that causes a dramatic change in his/her life.