A Glossary of Literary Terms

1. Allegory – a literary work in which characters, objects, and events stand for abstract qualities such as goodness, pleasure, or evil
2. Alliteration – the repetition of beginning consonant sounds
3. Allusion – a reference to an artistic, historical, or literary figure, work, or event
4. Ambiguity – a vagueness of meaning; a conscious lack of clarity meant to evoke multiple meanings and interpretation
5. Anachronism – a person, scene, event, or other element in literature that fails to correspond with the time or era in which the work is set
6. Analogy – a comparison that points out similarities between two dissimilar things
7. Anecdote – a short incident or story that illustrates a point
8. Annotation – a brief explanation, summary, or evaluation of a text or work of literature
9. Antagonist – a character who opposes the hero or main character of the story
10. Aphorism – a short, pithy statement of a generally accepted truth or sentiment
11. Archetype- an abstract or ideal conception of a type; a perfectly typical example
12. Assonance – the repetition of vowel sounds in a literary work, especially in a poem
13. Author – a person who creates any piece of literature
14. Bathos – a use of insincere or overdone sentimentality
15. Bibliography – a list of works cited or otherwise relevant to a subject or other work
16. Bildungsroman – a German word referring to a novel structured as a series of events that take place as the hero travels in quest of a goal
17. Bombast – inflated, pretentious language used for trivial subjects
18. Burlesque – a work of literature meant to ridicule a subject
19. Cacophony – grating, inharmonious sounds
20. Caesura – a pause somewhere in the middle of a verse, often marked by punctuation
21. Canon- the works considered most important in a national literature or period
22. Caricature – a grotesque likeness of striking qualities in persons or things
23. Carpe diem – seize the day
24. Catharsis – a cleansing of the spirit brought about by the pity and terror of a dramatic tragedy
25. Character – a person or animal in a story
26. Characterization – the manner in which an author creates and develops a character using exposition, dialogue, and action
27. Classic – a highly regarded work of literature or other art form that has withstood the test of time
28. Cliché – a trite phrase that has become so overused that it has lost its meaning or value
29. Climax – the high point, or turning point, of a story
30. Colloquialism – a local or regional expression
31. Coming of age story – a tale in which a young protagonist experiences an introduction to adulthood
32. Conceit – a witty or ingenious thought; a diverting or highly fanciful idea
33. Conflict – the struggle between opposing forces; external conflict involves an outer force such as nature or another character, while internal conflict exists inside a person
34. Connotation – the emotional associations surrounding a word
35. Consonance – a type of alliteration in which the repeated pattern of consonants is marked by changes in the intervening vowels
36. Couplet – 2 consecutive lines of poetry that end in a rhyme
37. Denotation – the dictionary definition of a word
38. Denouement – the resolution that occurs at the end of a play or work of fiction
39. Deus ex machina – in literature, the use of an artificial device or gimmick to solve a problem
40. Dialect – the distinctive pattern of speech of people from a certain group or region
41. Dialogue – conversation between characters in a literary work
42. Diction – the choice of words in oral or written discourse
43. Drama – a staged narrative portraying conflict between characters through action and dialogue
44. Ellipsis – three periods indicating the omission of words in a thought or quotation
45. End stopped – a term that describes a line of poetry that ends with a natural pause often indicated by a mark of punctuation
46. Enjambment – in poetry, the use of successive lines with no punctuation or pause between them
47. Epigram – a concise but ingenious, witty, and thoughtful statement
48. Epilogue – a short passage often designed to bring closure to a literary work
49. Epitaph – an inscription carved on a gravestone
50. Epithet – an adjective or phrase that expresses a striking quality of a person or thing
51. Eponymous – a term for the title character of a work of literature
52. Essay – a literary composition, usually dealing with its subject from a limited and often personal point of view
53. Eulogy – a formal expression of praise, usually about the dead
54. Euphemism – a mild or less negative usage for a harsh or blunt term
55. Euphony – pleasing, harmonious sounds
56. Expose – a piece of writing that reveals weaknesses, faults, frailties, or other shortcomings
57. Explication – the interpretation or analysis of a text
58. Exposition – information about the background of a story’s plot that is directly conveyed or explained, usually by the narrator
59. Extended metaphor – a series of comparisons between two unlike objects
60. Falling action – the events of a plot that follow the climax
61. Figurative language – language that includes figures of speech such as similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, etc.
62. Figure of speech – an expression that conveys meaning or increases an effect, usually through figurative language
63. Flashback – an interruption of the normal chronological order of a plot to narrate events that occurred earlier
64. Foil – a minor character whose personality or attitude contrasts with that of the main character
65. Foot – a unit of stressed and unstressed syllables used to determine the meter of a poetic line
66. Foreshadowing – the use of hints or clues about what will happen later in the plot
67. Frame – a structure that provides premise or setting for a narrative
68. Free verse – poetry based on the rhythms and pauses of natural speech, rather than the constrains of rhyme
69. Genre – a distinctive type or category of literature
70. Harangue – a forceful sermon, lecture, or tirade
71. Hero – the main character in a story – also called the protagonist
72. Hubris – the excessive pride that often leads tragic heroes to their death
73. Humanism – a belief that emphasizes faith and optimism in human potential and creativity
74. Hyperbole – an overstatement or exaggeration
75. Idiom – an expression whose sense cannot be understood from a literal meaning of the words that form it
76. Imagery – vivid and striking descriptions of objects and details in a literary work
77. Inference – a reasonable conclusion drawn by the reader based on clues given in a literary work
78. Internal rhyme – rhyming of words or accented syllables within a line of poetry
79. Interpretation – an explanation of the meaning of a piece of literature, dependent in part on the perspective of the reader
80. Irony – a recognition of the difference between appearance and reality; situational irony occurs when events turn out differently from what is expected; dramatic irony occurs when the audience has important knowledge that a main character lacks
81. Jargon – specialized words and phrases used in an occupation, trade, or field of study
82. Litotes – a form of understatement in which the negative of the contrary is used to achieve emphasis or intensity
83. Metaphor – a figure of speech that implies a similarity between two unlike things
84. Meter – the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry
85. Metonymy – a figure of speech that uses the name of one thing to represent something else with which it is associated
86. Mood – overall atmosphere of a work; the emotional tone in a work
87. Motif – a phrase, idea, or event that through repetition serves to unify or convey a theme in a work of literature
88. Motivation – the reasons or forces that cause characters to act as they do
89. Narrator – a teller of a story
90. Nonfiction – a story of actual people and events sometimes told with the dramatic techniques of a novel
91. Non sequitur – a statement or idea that fails to follow logically from the one before
92. Ode – a lyric poem usually marked by serious, respectful, and exalted feelings toward the subject
93. Onomatopoeia – words that sounds like their meaning
94. Oxymoron – a contradiction that makes sense of a deeper level
95. Paradox – a statement or situation that seems contradictory by may in fact be true
96. Paraphrase – a version of a text put into simpler, everyday, words
97. Pastoral – a work of literature dealing with rural life
98. Personification – a figure of speech in which human characteristics are given to nonhuman things
99. Plot – the events in a story that show the characters in action
100. Poem – a work written in verse
101. Point of view – the perspective from which a story is told; in first person point of view, the narrator is a character in the story and uses the personal pronoun “I”; in third person limited point of view, the narrator is outside the story but presents the story through the thoughts and feelings of one character; in third person omniscient point of view, the narrator is outside the story, knows the thoughts and feelings of all characters, and can comment on any part of the story
102. Prologue – introductory section before a work of fiction or nonfiction
103. Prose – an literary material that is not written in a regular meter
104. Proverb – a brief saying that is in general use and expresses a commonly held idea or belief
105. Pseudonym – also called “pen name” or “nom de plume,” it is a false name or alias used by writers
106. Pun – a play on two words similar in sound but different in meaning
107. Realism – the depiction of people, things, and events as they really are without exaggeration or idealization for effect
108. Refrain – a repeated line or set of lines at the end of a stanza or section of a longer poem or song
109. Repetition – a technique in which words or phrases are repeated to stress a them or to provide unity to a work
110. Resolution – the point at which the chief conflict or complication of a story is worked out
111. Rhetoric – the language of a work and its style; often highly emotional, used to convince or sway an audience
112. Rhyme scheme – the pattern of end rhymes in the lines of a poem; usually represented by pairs of letters
113. Rhythm – the pattern of sounds in speech or writing that is created by the careful arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables; may create mood or emphasize ideas or themes
114. Rising action – the events leading up to the climax of a plot
115. Setting – time and place of the action of a story
116. Simile – a comparison of one thing to another that uses like or as
117. Soliloquy – a monologue spoken by an actor at a point in the play when the character believes he is alone; frequently reveals a character’s innermost thoughts, feelings, motives, or intentions; often provides necessary but otherwise unavailable information to the audience
118. Stanza – a set of lines of verse; in formal verse, stanzas will form a set pattern
119. Stream of consciousness – a style of writing in which the author tires to reproduce the random flow of thoughts in the human mind
120. Style – the manner in which an author uses and arranges words, shapes ideas, forms sentences, and creates a structure to convey ideas
121. Subtext – a hidden meaning, often symbolic that must be inferred from the text
122. Symbol – an object that stands for, or represents, an abstract concept
123. Synecdoche – a figure of speech in which a part signifies the whole or the whole signifies the part
124. Syntax – the organization of language into meaningful structure; every sentence has a particular syntax or pattern of words; arrangement of words
125. Theme – the underlying meaning or message of a literary work
126. Tone – the author or narrator’s attitude toward the subject of a work
127. Voice – an author or character’s distinctive way of expressing himself