Key Terms for AP

Adapted from: Dr. Wheeler’s page of literary terms - <http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/index.html>

\*Terms marked with the asterisk appear in the Big Idea and Key Understandings from CollegeBoard

**ALLEGORY**: The word derives from the Greek *allegoria* ("speaking otherwise"). The term loosely describes any writing in verse or prose that has a double meaning. This narrative acts as an extended metaphor in which persons, abstract ideas, or events represent not only themselves on the literal level, but they also stand for something else on the symbolic level.

**ALLITERATION**: Repeating a consonant sound in close proximity to others, or beginning several words with the same vowel sound.

**\*ALLUSION**: A casual reference in literature to a person, place, event, or another passage of literature, often without explicit identification. Allusions can originate in mythology, biblical references, historical events, legends, geography, or earlier literary works. Authors often use allusion to establish a tone, create an implied association, contrast two objects or people, make an unusual juxtaposition of references, or bring the reader into a world of experience outside the limitations of the story itself. Authors assume that the readers will recognize the original sources and relate their meaning to the new context.

**APOSTROPHE**: Not to be confused with the punctuation mark, apostrophe is the act of addressing some abstraction or personification that is not physically present: For instance, John Donne commands, "Oh, Death, be not proud."

**\*CHARACTER:** any representation of an individual being presented in a dramatic or narrative work through extended dramatic or verbal representation. The reader can interpret characters as endowed with moral and dispositional qualities expressed in what they say (dialogue) and what they do (action). E. M. Forster describes characters as "flat" (i.e., built around a single idea or quality and unchanging over the course of the narrative) or "round" (complex in temperament and motivation; drawn with subtlety; capable of growth and change during the course of the narrative). The main character of a work of a fiction is typically called the protagonist; the character against whom the protagonist struggles or contends (if there is one), is the antagonist.

**\*CHARACTERIZATION**: An author or poet's use of description, dialogue, dialect, and action to create in the reader an emotional or intellectual reaction to a character or to make the character more vivid and realistic. Careful readers note each character's attitude and thoughts, actions and reaction, as well as any language that reveals geographic, social, or cultural background.

**\*CONFLICT:** The opposition between two characters (such as a protagonist and an antagonist), between two large groups of people, or between the protagonist and a larger problem such as forces of nature, ideas, public mores, and so on. Conflict may also be completely internal, such as the protagonist struggling with his psychological tendencies (drug addiction, self-destructive behavior, and so on); William Faulkner famously claimed that the most important literature deals with the subject of "the human heart in conflict with itself." In complex works of literature, multiple conflicts may occur at once.

**\*CONNOTATION**: The extra tinge or taint of meaning each word carries beyond the minimal, strict definition found in a dictionary.

**\*DENOTATION**: The minimal, strict definition of a word as found in a dictionary, disregarding any historical or emotional connotation.

**\*DICTION**: The choice of a particular word as opposed to others. A writer could call a rock formation by many words--a stone, a boulder, an outcropping, a pile of rocks, a cairn, a mound, or even an "anomalous geological feature."

**EUPHEMISM**: Using a mild or gentle phrase instead of a blunt, embarrassing, or painful one. For instance, saying "Grandfather has gone to a better place" is a euphemism for "Grandfather has died." The idea is to put something bad, disturbing, or embarrassing in an inoffensive or neutral light. Frequently, words referring directly to death, unpopular politics, blasphemy, crime, and sexual or excremental activities (“Going to the bathroom”) are replaced by euphemisms.

**\*FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE:** A deviation from what speakers of a language understand as the ordinary or standard use of words in order to achieve some special meaning or effect. Any figure of speech that results in a change of meaning is called a **trope**. Any figure of speech that creates its effect in patterns of words or letters in a sentence, rather than twisting the meaning of words, is called a **scheme**.

**\*FOIL**: A character that serves by contrast to highlight or emphasize opposing traits in another character. For instance, in the film *Chasing Amy*, the character Silent Bob is a foil for his partner, Jake, who is loquacious and foul-mouthed. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Laertes the unthinking man of action is a foil to the intelligent but reluctant Hamlet.

**\*FORESHADOWING**: Suggesting, hinting, indicating, or showing what will occur later in a narrative. Foreshadowing often provides hints about what will happen next. For instance, a movie director might show a clip in which two parents discuss their son's leukemia. The camera briefly changes shots to do an extended close-up of a dying plant in the garden outside, or one of the parents might mention that another relative died on the same date. The perceptive audience sees the dying plant, or hears the reference to the date of death, and realizes this detail foreshadows the child's death later in the movie. Often this foreshadowing takes the form of a noteworthy coincidence or appears in a verbal echo of dialogue.

**HAMARTIA**: A term from Greek tragedy that literally means "missing the mark." Originally applied to an archer who misses the target, a hamartia came to signify a tragic flaw, especially a misperception, a lack of some important insight, or some blindness that ironically results from one's own strengths and abilities. In Greek tragedy, the protagonist frequently possesses some sort of hamartia that causes catastrophic results after he fails to recognize some fact or truth that could have saved him if he recognized it earlier. The idea of hamartia is often ironic; it frequently implies the very trait that makes the individual noteworthy is what ultimately causes the protagonist's decline into disaster.

**HYPERBOLE**: the trope of exaggeration or overstatement.

**\*IMAGERY**: A common term of variable meaning, imagery includes the "mental pictures" that readers experience with a passage of literature. It signifies all the sensory perceptions referred to in a poem, whether by literal description, allusion, simile, or metaphor. Imagery is not limited to visual imagery; it also includes auditory (sound), tactile (touch), thermal (heat and cold), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), and kinesthetic sensation (movement).

**\*IRONY**: Cicero referred to irony as "saying one thing and meaning another." Irony comes in many forms. Verbal irony (also called *sarcasm*) is a trope in which a speaker makes a statement in which its actual meaning differs sharply from the meaning that the words express. Dramatic irony (the most important type for literature) involves a situation in a narrative in which the reader knows something about present or future circumstances that the character does not know. Situational irony is a trope in which accidental events occur that seem oddly appropriate, such as the poetic justice of a pickpocket getting his own pocket picked. However, both the victim and the audience are simultaneously aware of the situation in situational irony.

**JUXTAPOSITION**: The arrangement of two or more ideas, characters, actions, settings, phrases, or words side-by-side or in similar narrative moments for the purpose of comparison, contrast, rhetorical effect, suspense, or character development.

**MEIOSIS**: Understatement, the opposite of exaggeration: "I was somewhat worried when the psychopath ran toward me with a chainsaw." (i.e., I was terrified). Litotes (especially popular in Old English poetry) is a type of meiosis in which the writer uses a statement in the negative to create the effect: "You know, Einstein is not a bad mathematician." (i.e., Einstein is a good mathematician.) "That pustulant wart is somewhat unbeautiful" (i.e., That pustulant wart is ugly). Litotes is recognizable in English by negatives like not, no, non- and un-.)

**\*METAPHOR**: A comparison or analogy stated in such a way as to imply that one object is another one, figuratively speaking.

**METONYMY**: Using a vaguely suggestive, physical object to embody a more general idea. The term metonym also applies to the object itself used to suggest that more general idea. Some examples of metonymy are using the metonym crown in reference to royalty or the entire royal family, or stating "the pen is mightier than the sword" to suggest that the power of education and writing is more potent for changing the world than military force.

**MOTIF**: A conspicuous recurring element, such as a type of incident, a device, a reference, or verbal formula, which appears frequently in works of literature. For instance, the "loathly lady" who turns out to be a beautiful princess is a common motif in folklore, and the man fatally bewitched by a fairy lady is a common folkloric motif appearing in Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci."

**ONOMATOPOEIA**: The use of sounds that are similar to the noise they represent for a rhetorical or artistic effect.

**OXYMORON** (plural *oxymora*, also called *paradox*): Using contradiction in a manner that oddly makes sense on a deeper level. Simple examples include such oxymora as *jumbo shrimp, sophisticated rednecks,* and *military intelligence*. The richest oxymora seem to reveal a deeper truth through their contradictions. These oxymora are sometimes called **paradoxes**. For instance, "without laws, we can have no freedom."

**PARADOX** (also called *oxymoron*): Using contradiction in a manner that oddly makes sense on a deeper level. Common paradoxes seem to reveal a deeper truth through their contradictions, such as noting that "without laws, we can have no freedom." Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* also makes use of a famous paradox: "Cowards die many times before their deaths" (2.2.32).

**PARALLELISM**:When the writer establishes similar patterns of grammatical structure and length. For instance, "King Alfred tried to make the law clear, precise, and equitable.” The previous sentence has parallel structure in use of adjectives. However, the following sentence does not use parallelism: "King Alfred tried to make clear laws that had precision and were equitable.”

**PERSONIFICATION**: giving human qualities to inanimate objects: "The ground thirsts for rain; the wind whispered secrets to us." In this example nature in general is personified.

**\*POINT OF VIEW**: The way a story gets told and who tells it. It is the method of narration that determines the position, or angle of vision, from which the story unfolds. Point of view governs the reader's access to the story. Many narratives appear in the *first person* (the narrator speaks as "I" and the narrator is a character in the story who may or may not influence events within it). Another common type of narrative is the *third-person narrative* (the narrator seems to be someone standing outside the story who refers to all the characters by name or as he, she, they, and so on). When the narrator reports speech and action, but never comments on the thoughts of other characters, it is the *dramatic third person* point of view or *objective point of view*. The third-person narrator can be *omniscient*—a narrator who knows everything that needs to be known about the agents and events in the story, and is free to move at will in time and place, and who has privileged access to a character's thoughts, feelings, and motives. The narrator can also be *limited*—a narrator who is confined to what is experienced, thought, or felt by a single character, or at most a limited number of characters. Finally, there is the *unreliable narrator* (a narrator who describes events in the story, but seems to make obvious mistakes or misinterpretations that may be apparent to a careful reader). Unreliable narration often serves to characterize the narrator as someone foolish or unobservant.

**PUN:** a “play on words” based on the multiple meanings of a single word or on words

that sound alike but mean different things.

**\*SETTING:** The general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which the action of a fictional or dramatic work occurs; the setting of an episode or scene within a work is the particular physical location in which it takes place. Setting can be a central or peripheral factor in the meaning of a work. The setting is usually established through description—but sometimes narration or dialogue also reveals the location and time.

**\*SHIFT:** The abrupt change in narration, setting, or general idea that indicates a more significant change. For instance, in Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party” the point of view abruptly shifts from Laura Sheridan to her mother when Laura sets off for the village down the road, indicating a shift from an adolescent’s point of view to an adult’s point of view. This shift clarifies that Laura is still very much a child even in her own society and even after she assumed she had grown up more.

**\*SIMILE**: An analogy or comparison implied by using an adverbial preposition such as like or as, in contrast with a metaphor, which figuratively makes the comparison by stating outright that one thing is another thing.

**\*SYNTAX:** The standard word order and sentence structure of a language, as opposed to diction (the actual choice of words) or content (the meaning of individual words). Standard English syntax prefers a Subject-Verb-Object pattern, but poets may tweak syntax to achieve rhetorical or poetic effects. Note that syntax is what allows us to produce sequential grammatical units such as phrases, clauses, and sentences.

**\*SYMBOL:** A word, place, character, or object that means something beyond what it is on a literal level. In literature, symbols can be cultural, contextual, or personal. An object, a setting, or even a character can represent another more general idea.

**SYNECDOCHE**: A rhetorical trope involving a part of an object representing the whole, or the whole of an object representing a part. For instance, a writer might state, "Twenty eyes watched our every move." Rather than implying that twenty disembodied eyes are swiveling to follow him as he walks by, he means that ten people watched the group's every move. When a captain calls out, "All hands on deck," he wants the whole sailors, not just their hands. When a cowboy talks about owning "forty head of cattle," he isn't talking about stuffed cowskulls hanging in his trophy room, but rather forty live cows and their bovine bodies.

**\*TONE**: The means of creating a relationship or conveying an attitude or mood. By looking carefully at the choices an author makes (in characters, incidents, setting; in the work's stylistic choices and diction, etc.), careful readers often can isolate the tone of a work and sometimes infer from it the underlying attitudes that control and color the story or poem as a whole.