

Important Literary Terms for SAT Subject Test: Literature

Anachronism

An item or person that is “out of place” in relation to a time period. Example: In a certain short-short story, an abacus is used in computer programming. A second type, prochronism, occurs when an object from the present or future appears in a historical setting. Example: In a novel about World War I, soldiers would listen to iPods in the trenches.

Anaphora

The repetition of a word or phrase at the very beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences.

Aphorism

A short, wise saying that portrays a general truth or idea held by many people. Example: “One man’s meat is another man’s poison.” Another example, from Nietzsche; “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

Apostrophe

A form of direct address spoken by a character to an inanimate object or a person who does not appear. Example: “Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him.” From Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar.

Archaism

The use of an older or obsolete word or phrase that is no longer recognized or popular in the culture. Example: “You bring me, tomorrow early, that file and them vittles” (food). From Great Expectations by Charles Dickens.

Cliché

An overused and sometimes trite word or expression. Example: When George Orwell coined the term “Big Brother” in 1984, it was a new phrase; however, people now often use it to mean they are being watched.

Colloquialism

An expression that people may use in casual conversations but which is too informal or full of slang for proper English. Example: “But any kid with brains knows that there’ve been some changes in science since the days of old Mazer Rackham and the Victorious Fleet” From Orson Scott Card’s Ender’s Game.

Conceit

An extended metaphor or controlling image in a piece of literature. Often the conceit employs a unique image to create a relationship within the metaphor. Example: Many sonnets and love poems compare one's love to a blossoming flower as the image or conceit.

Connotation

The implied and understood meaning of a phrase or expression which extends beyond the explicit dictionary definition. Example: An emotionally positive response is often attached to the adjective; but the adjective "scrawny" causes most people to think of an extremely skinny, unattractive person.

Denotation

The literal or dictionary meaning of a word, phrase, or clause.

Epithet

It includes a word or group of words to describe the chief qualities of a person or thing. Example: The Holy Bible, Alexander, The Great.

Euphemism

A word or phrase that, as a substitution, "softens the blow" of the direct meaning. Example: A friend might say that your neighbour has "passed away," rather than telling you outright that the neighbour is dead.

Sarcasm

The use of invectives or harsh terms to indicate weakness or fault. Sarcasm can be cutting and cynical and may be displayed by an action as well as by words.

Example: George Orwell uses sarcasm to chastise the government in both *Animal Farm* and *1984*.

Simile

Indirect comparison between two unlike objects using the words "like" or "as". The comparison helps create an effective word picture. Example: In John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, Dr. Fujii is "squeezed...like a morsel between two huge chopsticks" (11).

Synecdoche

A metaphor that presents a part of a person or item as used for the whole or the whole as used for a part.

Example: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade ..." from *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* (By William Shakespeare)

Allusion

An author's reference to a person, place, event, or piece of literature which he expects his audience to recognize or understand. Example: In John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, the author assumes his readers' familiarity with the Biblical flood and the Moses story, mentioned at the end of the book.

Caricature

A representation of a character in which, in literature, his or her characteristics are exaggerated to produce a comic effect. Example: In Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the "Duke" is a caricature designed to satirize and create humor.

Consciousness

A style of writing in which the author uses interior monologue to show how the mind works. The unbroken flow of a character's thoughts and perceptions are revealed either directly (first-person narrative) or indirectly through free-wheeling discourse.

Epiphany

In literature, a sudden revelation that illuminates meaning or understanding—an "aha" moment.

Foreshadowing

A hint of what is going to happen next. Example: In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the speech by Friar Lawrence about the mingling of good and evil foreshadows the coming entanglements in the play.

In Media Res

A Latin expression that means that the story actually starts in the middle of the action. Example: Since the *Odyssey* starts in *Media Res*, with Odysseus imprisoned, an audience already familiar with the character Odysseus can forego mention of his background and go to the heart of the action.

Irony

A literary device in which action or language stands in contrast to what appears to be true or expected. Example: "Dr. Fujii hardly had time to think that he was dying before he realized that he was alive..." (11). From John Hersey's *Hiroshima*.

There are three types of irony: verbal, situational and dramatic.

Verbal irony occurs when a speaker's intention is the *opposite* of what he or she is saying. For example, a character stepping out into a hurricane, saying, "What nice weather we're having!"

Situational irony occurs when the actual result of a situation is totally different from what you'd expect the result to be. Sitcoms often use situational irony. For example, a family spends a lot of time and money planning an elaborate surprise birthday party for their mother to show her how much they care. But it turns out, her birthday is *next* month, and none of them knew the correct date. She ends up fuming that no one cares enough to remember her birthday.

Dramatic irony occurs when the audience knows a key piece of information that a character in a play, movie or novel does not. This is the type of irony that makes us yell, "DON'T GO IN THERE!!" during a scary movie. Dramatic irony is huge in Shakespeare's tragedies, most famously in *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Melodrama

A drama of any type that relies on stereotypes or two-dimensional characters whom the audience recognizes. An exaggeration of emotions, behaviours, and events is often evident in a melodrama. Example: Melodramas often use a serialized story line, damsels in distress, and characters who are clearly good or evil, as in the early silent film, "The Perils of Pauline".

Poetic Diction

A manner of speaking or expression that is used mainly in poetry and not in casual conversation. Example: William Wordsworth's poem, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," provides a classic example of the elevated language of some poetry.

Archetype

A pattern from which copies can be made or, in literature, a symbolic character: the hero, scapegoat, outcast, ne'er-do-well, etc. The heroic quest, as plot, is an archetype that adds depth to the literature. Example: Bilbo Baggins in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* represents the archetype of the reluctant hero on his journey.

Imagery

A word picture or sensory impression created by a writer's adept choice of words. Example: In *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair is literally able to sicken his readers with the raw imagery he employs in his descriptions of conditions within Chicago's meatpacking plants.

Motif

A recurrent and conspicuous thematic element. Example: In Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, one motif is that of dishonesty. Early in the novel, just after the intercalary exchange, Ender thinks, "Sometimes lies were more dependable than the truth" (2).

Symbol

The literary device of using a person, object, or action to stand for something else—often an abstract idea. Example: In many pieces of literature, the dove as a universal symbol represents peace. In *Moby Dick*, a constructed symbol—devised by author Herman Melville to convey a specific meaning—is the white whale as his symbol of evil.

Poetic Forms

Sonnet

A sonnet is a 14 line poem usually constructed in the iambic pentameter with a fixed rhyme scheme. There are two common types of sonnets in the English language – Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet.

Lyric

Lyrics are oral forms of poetry, typically written in the first person, and deal with the speaker's own thoughts, perceptions, and feelings.

Free Verse

Free verse follows no rhyme scheme or meters of earlier poetry.

Blank verse

Lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter.