

"Every short story, at least for me, is a little act of discovery."
—Mary McCarthy

Understanding LITERATURE

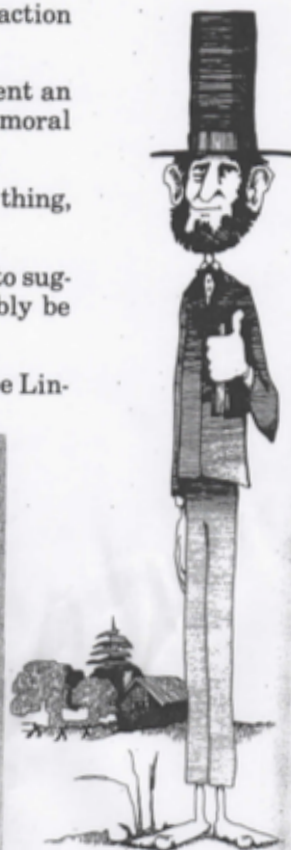
Literary Terms

- * 275 An **abstract** word or phrase refers to an idea rather than a concrete object or thing. *Liberty, prejudice, love, and freedom* are examples of abstract words.
- 276 **Action** is what happens in a story: the events or conflicts. If the action is well organized, it will develop into a pattern or plot.
- * 277 **Allegory** is a story in which people, things, and actions represent an idea or generalization about life; allegories often have a strong moral or lesson.
- * 278 An **allusion** is a reference in literature to a familiar person, place, thing, or event.
- 279 An **analogy** is a comparison of two or more similar objects so as to suggest that if they are alike in certain respects, they will probably be alike in other ways as well.
- 280 **Anecdote** is a short summary of a funny or humorous event. Abe Lincoln was famous for his anecdotes, especially this one:

Two fellows, after a hot dispute over how long a man's legs should be in proportion to his body, stormed into Lincoln's office one day and confronted him with their problem. Lincoln listened intently to the arguments given by each of the men and after some reflection rendered his verdict: "This question has been a source of controversy for untold ages," he said, slowly and deliberately, "and it is about time it should be definitely decided. It has led to bloodshed in the past, and there is no reason to suppose it will not lead to the same in the future.

"After much thought and consideration, not to mention mental worry and anxiety, it is my opinion, all side issues being swept aside, that a man's lower limbs, in order to preserve harmony of proportion, should be at least long enough to reach from his body to the ground."

- * 281 **Antagonist** is the person or thing working against the protagonist or hero of the work. When this is a person, he is usually called the *villain*.



- 282 **Autobiography** is an author's account or story of her own life.
- 283 **Biography** is the story of a person's life written by another person.
- 284 **Caricature** is a picture or imitation of a person's features or mannerisms exaggerated as to be comic or absurd. (See illustration on previous page.)
- 285 **Character** is a person in a story or poem.
- 286 **Characterization** is the method an author uses to reveal or describe his characters and their various personalities.
- * 287 **Cliche** is a word or phrase which is so overused that it is no longer effective in most writing situations, as in "as busy as a bee" and "I slept like a log."
- 288 **Climax** is the high point or turning point in a work, usually the most intense point.
- 289 **Comedy** is literature dealing with the comic or the serious in life in a light, humorous, or satiric manner. In comedy, human errors or problems appear funny.
- * 290 A **concrete** word refers to an object which can be heard, seen, felt, tasted, or smelled. *Wall, desk, car, and cow* are examples of concrete words. (See 275.)
- 291 **Conflict** is the "problem" in a story which triggers the action. There are five basic types of conflict:

Man vs. Man: One character in a story has a problem with one or more of the other characters.

Man vs. Society: A character has a conflict or problem with some element of society — the school, the law, the accepted way of doing things, and so on.

Man vs. Himself: A character has trouble deciding what to do in a particular situation.

Man vs. Nature: A character has a problem with some natural happening: a snowstorm, an avalanche, the bitter cold, or any of the other elements common to nature.

Man vs. Fate (God): A character has to battle what seems to be an uncontrollable problem. Whenever the problem seems to be a strange or unbelievable coincidence, fate can be considered as the cause of the conflict.

- * 292 **Connotation** is all the emotions or feelings a word can arouse, such as the negative or bad feeling associated with the word *pig* or the positive or good feeling associated with the word *love*.
- * 293 **Context** is the environment of a word; that is, the words, sentences, and paragraphs which surround a particular word and help to determine or deepen its meaning.
- * 294 **Denotation** is the literal or dictionary meaning of a word. (See *Connotation*.)
- 295 **Denouement** is the final solution or outcome of a play or story.
- * 296 **Description** is a type of writing which emphasizes the characteristics or qualities of a person, place, or thing in an attempt to create a clear word picture.
- 297 **Dialogue** is the conversation carried on by the characters in a literary work.
- * 298 **Diction** is an author's choice of words based on their correctness, clearness, or effectiveness.

Archaic words are those which are old-fashioned and no longer sound natural when used, as "*I believe thee not*" for "*I don't believe you.*"

Colloquialism is an expression which is usually accepted in informal writing or speaking but not in a formal situation, as in "*Hey, man, what's happenin'?*"

Jargon (technical diction) is the specialized language used by a specific group as with those who use computers: *override, interface, download*.

Profanity is language which shows disrespect for someone or something which is regarded as holy or sacred.

Slang is the language used by a particular group of people among themselves;

it is also language which is used in fiction and special writing situations to lend color and feeling: *awesome, rad, and narly*.

Trite expressions are those which lack depth or originality, or are overworked or not worth mentioning in the first place.

Vulgarity is language which is generally considered common, crude, gross, and, at times, offensive. It is sometimes used in fiction to enhance the realism of a work.

299 A **didactic** literary work has as its main purpose to present a moral or religious statement. It can also be, as in the case of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a work which stands on its own as valuable literature.

300 **Drama** is the form of literature known as *plays*; but drama also refers to the type of serious play that is often concerned with the leading character's relationship to society rather than with some tragic flaw within his personality.

* 301 **Dramatic monologue** is a poem in which a simple character speaks either to himself or to another character who is not present in a way which reveals much about that character.

302 **Empathy** is putting yourself in someone else's place and imagining how that person must feel. The phrase "What would you do if you were in my shoes?" is a request for one person to empathize with another.

* 303 **Epic** is a long narrative poem which tells of the deeds and adventures of a hero.

* 304 **Epigram** is a brief, witty poem or saying often dealing with its subject in a satirical manner: "There never was a good war or a bad peace" (Ben Franklin).

* 305 **Epitaph** is a short poem or verse written in memory of someone.

* 306 **Epithet** is a word or phrase used in place of a person's name; it is characteristic of that person: *Alexander the Great, Hammerin' Hank, and Mr. Nice Guy*.

307 **Essay** is a piece of prose which expresses an individual's point of view; usually, it is a series of closely related paragraphs which combine to make a complete piece of writing.

* 308 **Exaggeration** (*hyperbole*) is overstating or stretching the truth for literary effect: "My shoes are killing me."

309 **Exposition** is writing which is intended to make clear or explain something which might otherwise be difficult to understand; in a play or novel, it would be that portion which helps the reader to understand the background or situation in which the work is set.

310 **Falling action** is the action of a play or story which works out the decision arrived at during the climax. It ends with the resolution.

311 **Farce** is literature which has one purpose: to make the audience laugh.

* 312 **Figurative language** is language which cannot be taken literally since it was written to create a special effect or feeling.

* 313 **Figure of speech** is a literary device used to create a special meaning through emotional and connotative use of words. The most common types are *antithesis, apostrophe, hyperbole, litotes, metaphor, metonymy, personification, simile, symbol, synecdoche, and understatement* (371).

Antithesis is an opposing or contrast of ideas: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country" (President John F. Kennedy).

Apostrophe is a poetic device in which the poet talks to an absent person, place, or thing as if it were present: "O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done" (Walt Whitman addressing the deceased Abraham Lincoln).

Hyperbole (hi-pur'ba-li) is an exaggeration or overstatement: "My dad had a bird when he saw my grades."

Litotes (li'ta-tez) is a form of understatement in which something is expressed by

the negation of the contrary: "He was a man of *no small means*" (meaning of *considerable means*).

Metaphor is a comparing of two unlike things in which no words of comparison (*like* or *as*) are used: "That new kid in our class is really a squirrel."

Metonymy (ma-ton' a-mi) is the substituting of one word for another which is closely related to it: "The *White House* has decided to provide a million more public service jobs." (*White House* is substituting for *president*.)

Personification is a literary device in which the author elevates an animal, object, or idea to the level of a human such that it takes on the characteristics of a human personality: "The rock stubbornly refused to move."



Simile is a comparison of two unlike things in which a word of comparison (*like* or *as*) is used: "Mr. Kosinski's eyes are like charging bulls when he's mad."

Symbol is a concrete object used to represent an idea. A black object usually symbolizes death or sorrow.

Synecdoche (si-nek' da-ki) is using part of something to represent the whole: "All hands on deck." (*Hands* is being used to represent the whole person.)

- 314 **Flashback** is returning to an earlier time in a story for the purpose of making something in the present more clear.
- * 315 **Foreshadowing** is a suggestion of what is to come later in the work by giving hints and clues.
- * 316 **Form** is the way a work is organized or designed; it is the structure or frame into which the story is written.
- * 317 **Genre** is a French word often used as a synonym for *form* or *type* when referring to literature. The novel, essay, and poem are three of the many genres or forms of literature.
- 318 **Gothic novel** is a type of fiction which is usually characterized by gloomy castles, ghosts, and supernatural or sensational happenings—all of which is supposed to create a mysterious, chilling, and sometimes frightening story. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as well as several works by Edgar Allen Poe are probably the best known gothic works still popular today.
- * 319 **Imagery** is used to describe the words or phrases which bring forth a certain picture or image in the mind of the reader.
- 320 **Impressionism** is the recording of events or situations as they have been impressed

upon the mind. Impressionism deals with vague thoughts and remembrances; realism, with objective facts. In "A Child's Christmas in Wales," Dylan Thomas remembers his winters in Wales as they impressed him as a boy:

"... we waited to snowball the cats. Sleek and long as jaguars and horrible-whiskered, spitting and snarling, they would slink and sidle over the white back-garden walls, and the lynx-eyed hunters, Jim and I, fur-capped and moccasined trappers from Hudson Bay, off Mumbles Road, would hurl our deadly snowballs at the green of their eyes. The wise cats never appeared."

321 **Irony** is using a word or phrase to mean the exact opposite of its literal or normal meaning. There are three kinds of irony:

dramatic irony, wherein the reader or the audience sees a character's mistakes or misunderstandings which the character is unable to see himself.

verbal irony, in which the writer says one thing and means another.

irony of situation, in which there is a great difference between the purpose of a particular action and the result.

322 **Limerick** is a light, humorous verse of five lines with an *aabba* rhyme scheme:

There was a young lady from Maine,
Who was as thin as a cane;
When her bathing was done
And the water did run,
She slid through the hole in the drain.

323 **Local color** is the use of details which are common in a certain region or section of the country.

324 **Malapropism** is the type of pun or play on words which results when two words become jumbled in the speaker's mind. The term comes from a character in Sheridan's comedy, *The Rivals*. The character, Mrs. Malaprop, is constantly mixing up her words, as when she says "as headstrong as an *allegory* [she means *alligator*] on the banks of the Nile." Both words fit in the sentence, which is precisely what makes a malapropism a pun rather than a simple mistake.

325 **Melodrama** is an exaggerated, sensational form of drama which is intended to appeal to the emotions of the audience, as with many of the television soap operas.

326 **Mood** is the feeling a piece of literature arouses in the reader: happy, sad, peaceful, etc.

327 **Moral** is the particular value or lesson the author is trying to get across to the reader. The "moral of the story" is an especially popular phrase in Aesop's fables and other children's literature.

328 **Motif** is a term for an often-repeated character, incident, or idea in literature. The hero's saving a damsel in distress is a common *motif* of American melodrama.

329 **Myth** is a traditional story which attempts to explain or justify a certain practice, belief, or natural phenomenon of a people.

330 **Narration** is the type of writing which relates an event or series of events: a story. **Narrator** is the person who is telling the story.

331 **Naturalism** is an extreme form of realism in which the author tries to show the relation of man to his environment. Often, the author finds it necessary to show the base or ugly side of that relationship.

332 **Novel** is a term which covers a wide range of prose materials which have two common characteristics: they are fictional and lengthy.

333 **Oxymoron** is a combination of contradictory terms as in *cruel kindness*.

334 **Parable** is a short, descriptive story which illustrates a particular belief or moral.

- 335 **Paradox** is a statement that is seemingly contrary to common sense yet is, in fact, true; a self-contradictory statement: "The coach considered this a good loss."
- 336 **Parallelism** is the repeating of phrases or sentences that are similar (parallel) in meaning and structure, as with "of the people, by the people, and for the people."
- 337 **Parody** is a literary form which is intended to mock a particular literary work or its style; a *burlesque* or comic effect is created.
- 338 **Pathos** is a Greek root meaning *suffering* or *passion*. It is usually applied to the part in a play or story which is intended to bring out pity or sorrow from the audience or reader.
- 339 **Plagiarism** is using someone else's writing or ideas and trying to pass them off as your own.
- 340 **Plot** is the action in a story. It is usually a series of related incidents which builds and grows as the story develops. There are five basic parts or elements in a plot which make up a *plot line*.
- 341 **Plot line** is the graphic representation of the action or events in a story: *exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution*.



- 342 **Poetic justice** is a term which describes a character "getting what he deserves" in the end, especially if what he deserves is punishment. The purest form of poetic justice is when one character plots against another but ends up being caught in his own evil trap.
- 343 **Poetry** is language which reflects imagination, emotion, and thinking in verse form. There are many elements used in writing effective poetry:

Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in neighboring words as in "rough and ready." Many poetic examples of alliteration can be found in today's songs: "... though the *tangled trails of time* have led us far astray, the memory seems to stay" (from "Lonely People," Harry Chapin).

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds without the repetition of consonants as in "...my words like silent raindrops fell..." (from "Sounds of Silence," Paul Simon).

Ballad is a poem which tells a story and usually rhymes every other line.

Blank verse is an unrhymed form of poetry which normally consists of ten syllables in which every other syllable, beginning with the second, is stressed. Since blank verse is often used in very long poems, such as Frost's *Death of the Hired Man*, it may depart from the strict pattern from time to time to avoid monotony.

Canto is a division of a long poem.

Caesura is a pause or sudden break in a line of poetry.

Cinquain is a form of poetry, invented by Adelaide Crapsey, with lines of 2, 4, 6, 8, and 2 syllables. Another form of cinquain is word cinquain with lines of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 1 word.

Syllable Cinquain

Line 1:	Title	2 syllables
Line 2:	Description of title	4 syllables
Line 3:	Action about the title	6 syllables
Line 4:	Feeling about the title	8 syllables
Line 5:	Synonym for title	2 syllables

Word Cinquain

Line 1:	Title	1 word
Line 2:	Description of title	2 words
Line 3:	Action about the title	3 words
Line 4:	Feeling about the title	4 words
Line 5:	Synonym for title	1 word

Closed couplet (See "Stanza.")

Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds, especially in poetry. Consonance is similar to alliteration except that it is not limited to the first letter of each word as is alliteration: "...and high school girls with clear skin smiles..." (from "At Seventeen," Janis Ian).

Elegy is a formal poem mourning the death of a certain individual.

End rhyme is the rhyming of words which appear at the ends of two or more lines of poetry.

Enjambment is the running over of a sentence or thought from one verse or line to another.

Foot is a unit of meter which denotes the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables. (See "Verse.")

Iambic: an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable (repeat)

Anapestic: two unstressed followed by a stressed syllable (interrupt)

Trochaic: a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable (older)

Dactylic: a stressed followed by two unstressed syllables (openly)

Spondaic: two stressed syllables (heartbreak)

Pyrrhic: two unstressed syllables (Pyrrhic is very rare and seldom appears by itself.)

Free verse is poetry that does not have a regular meter or rhyme scheme: Edgar Lee Master's *Silence* is written in free verse.

Haiku is a form of Japanese poetry which has three lines; the first line has five syllables, the second has seven syllables, and the third has five syllables. The subject of the haiku has traditionally been nature as in:

Behind me the moon
Brushes shadows of pine trees
Lightly on the floor.

Heroic couplet (*closed couplet*) consists of two successive rhyming lines which contain a complete thought. It is usually written in iambic pentameter.

Internal rhyme occurs when the rhyming words appear in the same line of poetry: "We'll drink a *toast* to those who *most* believe in what they've won" (from "Tea and Sympathy," Janis Ian).

Lyric is a short verse which is intended to express the emotions of the author; quite often these lyrics are set to music.

Meter is the repetition of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry. (See "Foot.")

Ode is a lyric poem written to someone or something. It is serious and elevated in tone. Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" is a eulogy (words of high praise) written for the Southern soldiers after the Civil War.

Onomatopoeia is the use of a word whose sound suggests its meaning, as in *clang*, *buzz*, and *twang*.

Paradox is a statement which at first seems contradictory but which turns out to have a profound meaning as in Bob Dylan's lyric: "I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now."

Pastoral is a poem or dramatic work which was originally characterized by an ideal look at shepherd and rustic life. The term has since been extended to include any work which deals with the subject of rural life.

Psalm is a sacred or religious song or lyric.

Refrain is the repetition of a line or phrase of a poem at regular intervals, especially at the end of each stanza. The refrain in a song is called the *chorus*.

Repetition is the repeating of a word or phrase within a poem or prose piece to create a sense of rhythm: "But I sometimes think the difference is just in how I think and feel, and that the only changes *going on* are *going on* in me" (from "Changes," Harry Chapin).

Rhyme is the similarity or likeness of sound existing between two words. *Sat* and *cat* are perfect rhymes because the vowel and final consonant sounds are exactly the same.

Rhymed verse is verse with end rhyme; it usually has regular meter.

Rhythm is the ordered or free occurrences of sound in poetry. Regular rhythm which recurs is called meter. Free occurrence of sound is called free verse.

Scansion is the analysis of verse to show its meter.

Stanza is a division of poetry named for the number of lines it contains:

Couplet:	two-line stanza	Sestet:	six-line stanza
Triplet:	three-line stanza	Septet:	seven-line stanza
Quatrain:	four-line stanza	Octave:	eight-line stanza
Quintet:	five-line stanza		

(Note: All others are called nine-, ten-, eleven-, and so on, line stanzas.)

Verse is a metric line of poetry. It is named according to the kind and number of feet composing it: *iambic pentameter*, *anapestic tetrameter* . . . (See "Foot.")

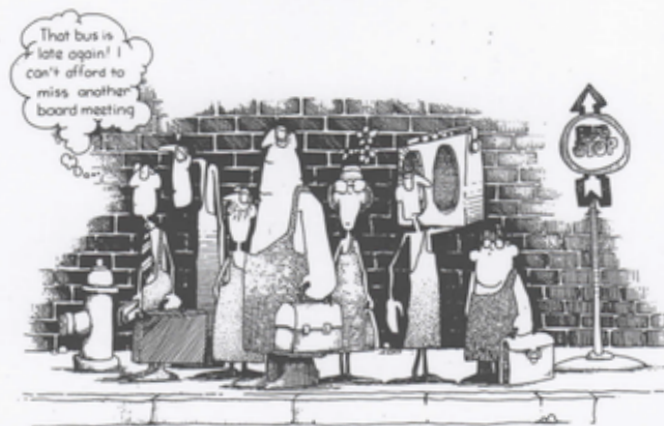
Monometer:	one foot	Pentameter:	five feet
Dimeter:	two feet	Hexameter:	six feet
Trimeter:	three feet	Heptameter:	seven feet
Tetrameter:	four feet	Octometer:	eight feet

Verse is usually found in one of three forms: *rhymed*, *blank*, or *free verse*.

- 344 **Point of view** is the vantage point from which the story is told. In the **first-person** point of view, the story is told by one of the characters: "I'm not reading that stupid book." In the **third-person** point of view, the story is told by someone outside the story: "He felt justified in refusing to read. After all, he couldn't read that book—it was too hard." There are three basic **third-person points of view**. (See next page.)
- 345 **Protagonist** is the main character or hero of the story.
- 346 **Pseudonym** means *false name* and is usually applied to the name writers use in place of their natural name. Mark Twain, which is probably the most famous pseudonym in literature, was assumed by the Hannibal, Missouri, writer Samuel Langhorne Clemens.
- 347 **Pun** is a word or phrase which is used in such a way as to suggest more than one possible meaning. Words used in the pun are words that sound the same (or nearly the same) but have different meanings: "I really don't mind going to school; it's the *principal* (*principle*) of the thing."
- 348 **Realism** is literature which attempts to represent life as it really is by paying close attention to what otherwise might be considered insignificant details.
- 349 **Renaissance**, which means *rebirth*, is the period of history following the Middle Ages. This period began late in the fourteenth century and continued through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Milton (1608-1674) is often regarded as the last of the great Renaissance poets. The term now applies to any period of time in which intellectual and artistic interest is revived or reborn.



Omniscient is a viewpoint which allows the narrator to relate the thoughts and feelings of all the characters; a *godlike* intuition.



Limited omniscient allows the narrator to relate the thoughts and feelings of only one character.



Camera view (Objective view) is seeing and recording the action from a neutral or unemotional point of view.

- 350 **Resolution** is the portion of the play or story where the problem is solved. It comes after the climax and falling action and is intended to bring the story to a satisfactory end; *denouement*.
- 351 **Rising action** is the series of conflicts which build a play toward a climax.
- * 352 **Romance** is a form of literature which presents life as we would like it to be rather than as it actually is. Usually, it has a great deal of adventure, love, and excitement.
- * 353 **Romanticism** is a literary movement with an emphasis on the imagination and emotions.
- * 354 **Sarcasm** is the use of praise to mock someone or something, as in "He's a real *he-man*," or "She's a real *winner*."
- * 355 **Satire** is a literary tone used to ridicule or make fun of human vice or weakness.
- 356 **Setting** is the time and place in which the action of a literary work occurs.
- 357 **Slapstick** is a form of low comedy which makes its appeal through the use of violent and exaggerated action. The "pie in the face" routine is a classic piece of *slapstick* as are the Charlie Chaplin and Mack Sennett films.
- 358 **Slice of life** is a term which describes the type of realistic or naturalistic writing which accurately reflects what life is really like. This is done by giving the reader a sample or *slice* of life.
- * 359 **Soliloquy** is a speech delivered by a character when he is alone on stage.
- * 360 **Sonnet** is a poem which usually consists of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. There are two popular forms of the sonnet, the Italian (or Petrarchan) and the Shakespearean (or English).
- Italian (Petrarchan)** sonnet has two parts: an octave of eight lines and a sestet of six lines, and usually rhyming *abbaabba, cdecde*. Often a question is raised in the octave and answered in the sestet.
- Shakespearean (English or Elizabethan)** sonnet consists of three quatrains and a final rhyming couplet. The rhyme scheme is *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*. Usually, the question or theme is set forth in the quatrains while the answer or resolution appears in the final couplet.
- 361 **Stereotype** is a pattern or form which does not change. A character is "stereotyped" if he has no individuality and fits the mold of that particular kind of person. For many years, Blacks were stereotyped in literature as maids, butlers, shoe-shine boys, and other servant-type characters.
- * 362 **Stream of consciousness** is a style of writing in which the thoughts and feelings of the writer are recorded as they occur.
- 363 **Structure** is the form or organization a writer uses for his literary work. There are a great number of possible forms or structures used regularly in literature: *parable, fable, romance, satire, farce, slapstick*, and so on.
- * 364 **Style** is *how* the author writes (form) rather than *what* he writes (content).
- * 365 **Theme** is the statement about life a particular work is trying to get across to the reader. In stories written for children, the theme is often spelled out clearly at the end when the author says, "...and so, the moral of the story is: Never tell your mother or father something that isn't true or they may not believe you when you tell the truth." In more complex literature, the theme may not be so moralistic in tone, or at least not so clearly spelled out.
- * 366 **Tone** is the attitude of the author toward his audience and characters. This attitude may be *serious, mock-serious, humorous, satiric*, and so on.
- * 367 **Total effect** is the final, overall impression left with the reader by a literary work.
- 368 **Tragedy** is a literary work in which the hero is destroyed by some flaw within his character and by forces which he cannot control.

- 369 **Tragic hero** is a character who experiences an inner struggle because of some flaw within his character. That struggle ends in the defeat of the hero.
- * 370 **Transcendentalism** is a philosophy which requires that man go beyond (transcend) reason in his search for truth. Man can arrive at the basic truths of life through spiritual intuition or instinct if he takes the time to meditate or think seriously about it.
- * 371 **Understatement** is the stating of an idea with considerable restraint or holding back so as to emphasize what is being talked about. Mark Twain once described Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly as being "prejudiced against snakes." Since she could not stand snakes, this way of saying so is called *understatement*.



