**Literary Terms / Figurative Language**

**Theme**: (1) the abstract concept explored in a literary work; (2) frequently recurring ideas, such as enjoy-life while-you-can; (3) repetition of a meaningful element in a work, such as references to sight, vision, and blindness in *Oedipus Rex*. Sometimes the theme is also called the motif. Themes in *Hamlet* include the nature of filial duty and the dilemma of the idealist in a non-ideal situation. A theme in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is the difficulty of correlating the ideal and the real.

An **allusion:** a brief reference to a person, event, place, or phrase. The writer assumes will recognize the reference. For instance, most of us would know the difference between a mechanic's being as reliable as George Washington or as reliable as Benedict Arnold. Allusions that are commonplace for readers in one era may require footnotes for readers in a later time.

**Denotation:** the literal meaning of a word; there are no emotions, values, or images associated with denotative meaning. Scientific and mathematical language carries few, if any emotional or connotative meanings.

**Connotation:** the emotions, values, or images associated with a word. The intensity of emotions or the power of the values and images associated with a word varies. Words connected with religion, politics, and sex tend to have the strongest feelings and images associated with them.

* For most people, the word *mother* calls up very strong positive feelings and associations--loving, self-sacrificing, always there for you, understanding; the denotative meaning, on the other hand, is simply "a female animal who has borne one or more chldren." Of course connotative meanings do not necessarily reflect reality; for instance, if someone said, "His mother is not very motherly," you would immediately understand the difference between *motherly* (connotation) and *mother* (denotation).

A **simile:** a comparison of two dissimilar things using "like" or "as", e.g., "my love is like a red, red rose" (Robert Burns).

A **metaphor:** a comparison of two dissimilar things which does not use "like" or "as," e.g., "my love is a red, red rose" (Lilia Melani).

**Personification:** treating abstractions or inanimate objects as human, that is, giving them human attributes, powers, or feelings, e.g., "nature wept" or "the wind whispered many truths to me."

**Hyperbole:** exaggeration, often extravagant; it may be used for serious or for comic effect.

**Symbol:** in general terms, anything that stands for something else. Obvious examples are flags, which symbolize a nation; the cross is a symbol for Christianity; Uncle Sam a symbol for the United States. In literature, a symbol is expected to have significance. Keats starts his ode with a real nightingale, but quickly it becomes a symbol, standing for a life of pure, unmixed joy; then before the end of the poem it becomes only a bird again.

**Syntax**: (Word Order / Sentence Structure) The way an author chooses to group words or text.

**Tone**: the writer's attitude toward the material and/or readers. Tone may be playful, formal, intimate, angry, serious, ironic, outraged, baffled, tender, serene, depressed, etc.