Film as Literature

Literary Terms of Film

THEME:  This is the main idea or message that holds the film together. Often referred to as the “central insight”, it is the film’s purpose.

To determine theme, it is helpful to take the story out of context and look at the ‘bigger picture”. Analyze the characters’ conflicts, what they are and how they are resolved, and apply the interpretation to ourselves and real life.

MOTIF:  The motif of a film is a recurring, salient thematic element. It is a device that occurs throughout the work and is used to somehow reinforce the theme. A motif can be an object or an idea. It is often visual; nothing is usually said about it in the film.

SYMBOL:  A symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else by reasons of resemblance or association. A symbol uses figurative meaning to allow something to represent an abstract idea. Colors, light, shadows and objects can all be symbols.

ARCHETYPES:  Archetypes are symbols, characters, settings or situations that everyone experiences and reacts to. An archetypal symbol is something that represents a common experience to the extent that it has universal symbolic power. Examples include the star-crossed lovers, the cemetery, the nerd, the jock - any thing, place or idea that we all recognize instinctively.

METAPHOR:  A metaphor is a figure of speech that likens one thing to another, different thing for description. In film, the metaphor is established with visual images. For example the first shot is of a girl and the second shot is of a swan, making a comparison of a girl and a swan that indicates that the girl is elegant, graceful and beautiful like a swan.

ALLUSION:  Allusion is an indirect reference used to tell more about a person, situation or object. The reference is to a famous piece of literature, another film, history, art, religion, mythology -- something that is easily understood by most viewers. It can be visual or spoken.
FORESHADOW: Foreshadow means to indicate beforehand. It is an action, a scene or a line in a film that hints to the viewer what to expect.

IRONY: Irony is the difference between what is expected and what actually happens. It is a contradiction between what is said and what is meant or between what is intended and what is done.

HOMAGE: Homage can be done with dialogue or objects. It is a reference to another person or work to show reverence, honor or respect. It can be in the form of a name given to a character, something said by one of the characters or something seen in the film. For example, director Rob Reiner wore a baseball cap that said “USS Coral Sea” in his first film This Is Spinal Tap. In his next film, the Princess Bride, that same hat hangs on the wall of the little boy’s bedroom.