A Guide to Literary Genres

Fiction

1. Allegory – a narrative in which the characters, setting, and actions represent abstract ideas, qualities, or situations beyond their literal function in the work. The general purpose of an allegory is to teach a moral lesson.
2. Fable – a short, often humorous, tale in which animals talk and behave as humans, intended to teach a lesson about human behavior. The lesson, or moral, is usually expressed at the end, but may remain unstated.
3. Fantasy – a literary work that is set in an unreal world and is characterized by impossible characters or events.
4. Folktale – a traditional story often passed orally from generation to generation before being written down. This genre includes myths, legends, tall tales, fairy tales, and epics.
5. Legend – a traditional story derived from folk literature that may be based on real people or events but that has become exaggerated and romanticized over time.
6. Myth – a traditional narrative that usually expresses the beliefs of a people concerning origins or aspects of nature or history. A myth generally has less historical background than a legend.
7. Novel – a book length fictional prose narrative, containing a plot, characters, setting, and theme. Shorter novels may be called novellas.
8. Parable – a simple story expressing a moral or religious lesson.
9. Parody – a humorous imitation of a serious work of literature. A parody usually achieves its humorous effects by exaggerating obvious features or shortcomings of the original work.
10. Satire – writing, usually humorous, that employs wit to ridicule human foibles or institutional excesses.
11. Science fiction – a form of fantasy that explores the impact of science and technology on individuals and society. It may be real or imagined, and the setting is often set in the near or far future.
12. Short story – a fictional narrative that contains characters, plot, setting, and theme, but is often short enough to be read in one sitting.

Nonfiction

1. Autobiography – an account of all or part of a person’s life, written by that person.
2. Biography – the story of a person’s life, in whole or in part, written by someone other than the subject.
3. Diary – a day to day record of events in a person’s life. Also called a journal, a diary may include thoughts, impressions, and descriptions of events and is written for personal use rather than for publication.
4. Essay – a short piece of nonfiction writing on any topic, with the purpose of communicating an idea or opinion.
5. History – a nonfiction account of real events from the past and the real people that lived them. Usually written chronologically and maintains an objective voice.
6. Memoir – autobiographical writing that may be more concerned with personalities and events of public importance than with the author’s private life.
7. Speech – a public talk given for some purpose.

Poetry

1. Ballad – a narrative song or poem.
2. Concrete poetry – a form of poetry in which the appearance of the words on the paper suggests the subject of the poem.
3. Epic – a long narrative poem that celebrates the adventures of a hero or a band of adventurers.
4. Haiku – traditional Japanese verse form that consists of 3 lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively.
5. Limerick – a poem, usually humorous, of 5 lines.
6. Lyric – a poem that expresses the speaker’s personal thoughts and feelings.
7. Narrative poetry – any poem that tells a story.
8. Sonnet – a lyric poem with a traditional form of 14 lines and a formal structure of verses and couplets.

Drama

1. Comedy – a type of drama that is humorous and usually has a happy ending.
2. Farce – a type of comedic drama characterized by ridiculous situations and outlandish characters.
3. Pantomime – a story or idea presented through body movements and expression rather than words.
4. Reader’s theatre – a form of drama in which the actors are seated and read aloud from scripts.
5. Screenplay – a play written to be filmed.
6. Tragedy – a play in which the main character, the tragic hero, a man or woman of high position or stature, suffers a downfall or death, often because of a weakness in character, known as a tragic flaw.