

Allegory

As a literary device, an **allegory** is a metaphor in which a character, place or event is used to deliver a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences. Allegory (in the sense of the practice and use of allegorical devices and works) has occurred widely throughout history in all forms of art, largely because it can readily illustrate or convey complex ideas and concepts in ways that are comprehensible or striking to its viewers, readers, or listeners.

Writers or speakers typically use allegories as literary devices or as rhetorical devices that convey (semi-)hidden or complex meanings through symbolic figures, actions, imagery, or events, which together create the moral, spiritual, or political meaning the author wishes to convey.^[2]

Contents

Etymology

Types

Classical allegory

Biblical allegory

Dreams as allegory

Medieval allegory

Modern allegory

Poetry and fiction

Art

Gallery

See also

References

Further reading

External links



Pearl, miniature from Cotton Nero A.x. The Dreamer stands on the other side of the stream from the Pearl-maiden. *Pearl* is one of the greatest allegories from the High Middle Ages^[1]

Etymology

First attested in English in 1382, the word *allegory* comes from Latin *allegoria*, the latinisation of the Greek ἀλληγορία (*allegoría*), "veiled language, figurative,"^[3] which in turn comes from both ἄλλος (*allos*), "another, different"^[4] and ἀγορεύω (*agoreuo*), "to harangue, to speak in the assembly"^[5] which originate from ἀγορά (*agora*), "assembly".^[6]

Types

Northrop Frye discussed what he termed a "continuum of allegory", a spectrum that ranges from what he termed the "naive allegory" of *The Faerie Queene*, to the more private allegories of modern paradox literature.^[7] In this perspective, the characters in a "naive" allegory are not fully three-dimensional, for each aspect of their individual personalities and the events that befall them embodies some moral quality or other abstraction; the allegory has been selected first, and the details merely flesh it out.

Many ancient religions are based on astrological allegories, that is, allegories of the movement of the sun and the moon as seen from the Earth.

Classical allegory

In classical literature two of the best-known allegories are the Cave in Plato's *Republic* (Book VII) and the story of the stomach and its members in the speech of Menenius Agrippa (Livy ii. 32).

Among the best-known examples of allegory, Plato's Allegory of the Cave, forms a part of his larger work *The Republic*. In this allegory, Plato describes a group of people who have lived chained in a cave all of their lives, facing a blank wall (514a–b). The people watch shadows projected on the wall by things passing in front of a fire behind them and begin to ascribe forms to these shadows, using language to identify their world (514c–515a). According to the allegory, the shadows are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality, until one of them finds his way into the outside world where he sees the actual objects that produced the shadows. He tries to tell the people in the cave of his discovery, but they do not believe him and vehemently resist his efforts to free them so they can see for themselves (516e–518a). This allegory is, on a basic level, about a philosopher who upon finding greater knowledge outside the cave of human understanding, seeks to share it as is his duty, and the foolishness of those who would ignore him because they think themselves educated enough.^[8]



Salvator Rosa: *Allegory of Fortune*, representing Fortuna, the goddess of luck, with the horn of plenty

In Late Antiquity Martianus Capella organized all the information a fifth-century upper-class male needed to know into an allegory of the wedding of Mercury and *Philologia*, with the seven liberal arts the young man needed to know as guests.^[9]

Biblical allegory

Other early allegories are found in the Hebrew Bible, such as the extended metaphor in Psalm 80 of the Vine and its impressive spread and growth, representing Israel's conquest and peopling of the Promised Land.^[10] Also allegorical is Ezekiel 16 and 17, wherein the capture of that same vine by the mighty Eagle represents Israel's exile to Rome.^[11]

Allegorical interpretation of the Bible was a common early Christian practice and continues. For example, the recently re-discovered IVth Commentary on the Gospels (<https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/books/9783110516371/9783110516371-003/9783110516371-003.pdf>) by Fortunatianus of Aquileia has a comment by its English translator: *The principal characteristic of Fortunatianus' exegesis is a figurative approach, relying on a set of concepts associated with key terms in order to create an allegorical decoding of the text.* (pXIX)

Dreams as allegory

Dreams show the tendency of the mindbrain to represent our life situation in metaphoric terms^[12]. The story of any dream can be seen as an allegory, as a metaphoric transfer of one situation onto another. This was the view of Montague Ullman, who considered the dream to be metaphoric of the dreamer's total life situation or a part of it: "The dream in its totality is a metaphorical explication of a circumstance of living explored in its fullest implications for the current scene." ^[13]

A dream often is structured like an allegory; the entire story of the dream suggests a metaphor-like transfer of meaning. This was true of the very first recorded dream, the dream of Gilgamesh 5000 years ago^[14]. Gilgamesh dreamt that an axe fell from the sky. The people gathered around it in admiration and worship. Gilgamesh threw the axe in front of his mother and then he embraced it like a wife. Gilgamesh told the dream to his mother, Ninsun, and she told him what it meant. She said that someone powerful would soon appear. Gilgamesh would struggle with him and try to overpower him, but he would not succeed. Eventually they would become close friends and accomplish great things. She said, "That you embraced him like a wife means: he will never forsake you! Thus your dream is solved!"^[15]

The same was true of Pharaoh's dream in the Old Testament that was interpreted by Joseph. Pharaoh dreamed: "He was standing by the Nile, and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream."

Joseph interpreted the dream as an allegory of Egypt's economic future. "The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine." Seven cows are symbols of the productivity of seven years; when the lean cows eat the fat cows, that is an allegory of seven years of famine succeeding seven years of prosperity. Freud^[16] established this as a principle; contiguity^[16] in time in a dream can symbolize a logical or sequential relationship; in Pharaoh's dream, it is "first this", "then that".

Medieval allegory

Allegory has an ability to freeze the temporality of a story, while infusing it with a spiritual context. Mediaeval thinking accepted allegory as having a *reality* underlying any rhetorical or fictional uses. The allegory was as true as the facts of surface appearances. Thus, the Papal Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302) presents themes of the unity of Christendom with the pope as its head in which the allegorical details of the metaphors are adduced as facts on which is based a demonstration with the vocabulary of logic: "*Therefore of this one and only Church there is one body and one head—not two heads as if it were a monster... If, then, the Greeks or others say that they were not committed to the care of Peter and his successors, they necessarily confess that they are not of the sheep of Christ.*" This text also demonstrates the frequent use of allegory in religious texts during the Mediaeval Period, following the tradition and example of the Bible.

In the late 15th century, the enigmatic *Hypnerotomachia*, with its elaborate woodcut illustrations, shows the influence of themed pageants and masques on contemporary allegorical representation, as humanist dialectic conveyed them.

The denial of medieval allegory as found in the 12th-century works of Hugh of St Victor and Edward Topsell's *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes* (London, 1607, 1653) and its replacement in the study of nature with methods of categorisation and mathematics by such figures as naturalist John Ray and the astronomer Galileo is thought to mark the beginnings of early modern science.^[18]

Modern allegory

Since meaningful stories are nearly always applicable to larger issues, allegories may be read into many stories which the author may not have recognised. This is allegoresis, or the act of reading a story as an allegory. Examples of allegory in popular culture that may or may not have been intended include the works of Bertolt Brecht, and even some works of science fiction and fantasy, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis and *A Kingdom Far and Clear: The Complete Swan Lake Trilogy* by Mark Helprin.

The story of the apple falling onto Isaac Newton's head is another famous allegory. It simplified the idea of gravity by depicting a simple way it was supposedly discovered. It also made the scientific revelation well known by condensing the theory into a short tale.

Poetry and fiction

It is important to note that while allegoresis may make discovery of allegory in any work, not every resonant work of modern fiction is allegorical, and some are clearly not intended to be viewed this way. According to Henry Littlefield's 1964 article, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, may be readily understood as a plot-driven fantasy narrative in an extended fable with talking animals and broadly sketched characters, intended to discuss the politics of the time.^[19] Yet, George MacDonald emphasised in 1893 that "A fairy tale is not an allegory."^[20]

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is another example of a well-known work mistakenly perceived as allegorical, as the author himself once stated, "...I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history - true or feigned- with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse applicability with allegory, but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author."^[21] While this does not mean his works may not be treated as having allegorical themes, especially when reinterpreted through postmodern sensibilities, it at least suggests that none were conscious in his writings. This further reinforces the idea of forced allegoresis, as allegory is often a matter of interpretation and only sometimes of original artistic intention.

Like allegorical stories, allegorical poetry has two meanings - a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning.

Some unique specimens of allegory can be found in the following works:

- Edmund Spenser - *The Faerie Queene*: The several knights in the poem actually stand for several virtues.
- William Shakespeare - *The Tempest*: a fight between good and evil on a deserted island
- John Bunyan - *The Pilgrim's Progress*: The journey of the protagonists Christian and Evangelist symbolises the ascension of the soul from earth to Heaven.
- Nathaniel Hawthorne - *Young Goodman Brown*: The Devil's Staff symbolises defiance of God. The characters' names, such as *Goodman* and *Faith*, ironically serve as paradox in the conclusion of the story.
- Nathaniel Hawthorne - *The Scarlet Letter*: The scarlet letter symbolises many things. The characters, while developed with interiority, are allegorical in that they represent ways of seeing the world. Symbolism is also prominent.
- George Orwell - *Animal Farm*: The pigs stand for political figures of the Russian Revolution.
- László Krasznahorkai - *The Melancholy of Resistance* and the film *Werckmeister Harmonies*: It uses a circus to describe an occupying dysfunctional government.
- Edgar Allan Poe - *The Masque of the Red Death*: The story can be read as an allegory for humans' inability to escape death.^[22]
- Arthur Miller - *The Crucible*: The Salem witch trials are thought to be an allegory for McCarthyism and the blacklisting of Communists in the United States of America.

Art

Some elaborate and successful specimens of allegory are to be found in the following works, arranged in approximate chronological order:

- Ambrogio Lorenzetti - *Allegoria del Buono e Cattivo Governo e loro Effetti in Città e Campagna* (c. 1338-1339)
- Sandro Botticelli - *Primavera* (c. 1482)
- Albrecht Dürer - *Melencolia I* (1514)
- Bronzino - *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* (c. 1545)
- The English School's - *"Allegory of Queen Elizabeth"* (c. 1610)
- Artemisia Gentileschi - *Allegory of Inclination* (c. 1620), *An Allegory of Peace and the Arts under the English Crown* (1638); *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (c. 1638-39)
- The *Feast of Herod with the Beheading of St John the Baptist* by Bartholomeus Strobel is also an allegory of Europe in the time of the Thirty Years War, with portraits of many leading political and military figures.
- Jan Vermeer - *Allegory of Painting* (c. 1666)
- Marcel Duchamp - *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1912-1923)
- Graydon Parrish - *The Cycle of Terror and Tragedy* (2006)
- Many statues of Lady Justice: "Such visual representations have raised the question why so many allegories in the history of art, pertaining occupations once reserved for men only, are of female sex."^[23]



British School 17th century - Portrait of a Lady, Called Elizabeth, Lady Tanfield. Sometimes the meaning of an allegory can be lost, even if art historians suspect that the artwork is an allegory of some kind.^[17]



Detail of Laurent de La Hyre's *Allegory of Arithmetic*, c. 1650

- Damien Hirst - *Verity* (2012)

Gallery

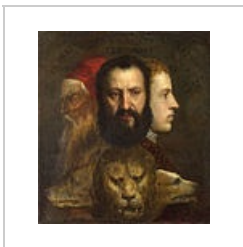
Allegorical Paintings of the 16th and 17th century



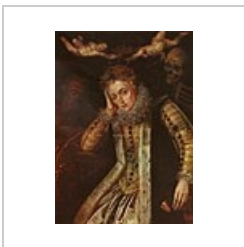
Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I* (1514): Unused tools, an hourglass, an empty scale surround a melancholic woman, other esoteric and exoteric symbols point to her alleged mental state.



Bronzino, *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* (c. 1545): The deities of love are surrounded by allegories of Time (a bald, man with angry eyes), Folly (the young woman-demon on the right, possibly also so old woman on the left).



Titian, *Allegory of Prudence* (c. 1565-1570): The three human heads symbolise past, present and future, the characterisation of which is furthered by the triple-headed beast (wolf, lion, dog), girded by the body of a big snake.



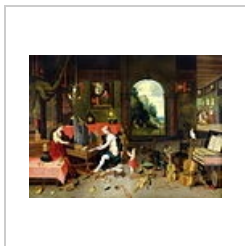
The English School's *Allegory of Queen Elizabeth* (c. 1610), with *Father Time* at her right and *Death* looking over her left shoulder. Two cherubs are removing the weighty crown from her tired head.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (c. 1638-39)



Jan Vermeer, *The Art of Painting* (c. 1666): Painting is shown as related to history and politics, the young woman being Clio, the muse of history, and other symbols for the political and religious division of the Netherlands appearing.



Jan van Kessel, *Allegory of Hearing* (17th century): Diverse sources of sound, especially instruments serve as allegorical symbols.

See also

- [Allegorical interpretation of the Bible](#)
- [Allegorical interpretations of Plato](#)
- [Allegory in the Middle Ages](#)
- [Allegory in Renaissance literature](#)
- [Allegorical sculpture](#)
- [Cultural depictions of Philip II of Spain](#)
- [Diwan \(poetry\)](#)
- [Freemasonry](#) ("a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.")
- [Parable](#)
- [Semiotics](#)
- [Theagenes of Rhegium](#)

References

1. Stephen A. Barney (1989). "Allegory". *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. vol. 1. ISBN 0-684-16760-3
2. Wheeler, L. Kip (11 January 2018). "A" (http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_A.html). *Literary Terms and Definitions*. Carson-Newman University

3. ἀλληγορία (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Da%29llhgori%2Fa>), Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, on Perseus Digital Library
4. ἄλλος (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Da%29%2Flls1>), Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, on Perseus Digital Library
5. ἀγορεύω (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Da%29goreu%2Fw>), Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, on Perseus Digital Library
6. ἀγορά (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Da%29gora%2F>), Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, on Perseus Digital Library
7. [Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957. Print.]
8. [Elliott, R. K. (1967). "Socrates and Plato's Cave". *Kant-Studien* 58 (2): 138.]
9. [Capella, Martianus, William Harris. Stahl, Richard Johnson, and E. L. Burge. *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. New York: Columbia UP, 1977. Print.]
10. Kennedy, George A. (1999). *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=LHHYx4idyPEC&pg=PA142>) (2nd ed.). UNC Press. p. 142. ISBN 0-8078-4769-0. Retrieved 7 August 2009.
11. Jones, Alexander, ed. (1968). *The Jerusalem Bible* (Reader's ed.). Doubleday & Company. pp. 1186, 1189. ISBN 0-385-01156-3.
12. Blechner, M. J. *The Mindbrain and Dreams*. New York: Routledge
13. Ullman, M. (1969) "Dreaming as metaphor in motion". *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 21:696-703
14. Thompson, R. (1930) *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Oxford University Press.
15. Oppenheim, A. (1956) The interpretation of dreams in the ancient Near East with a translation of an Assyrian dreambook. 'Transactions of the American Philosophical Society', 46(3): 179-373.
16. Freud, S. (1900) 'The Interpretation of Dreams' London: Hogarth Press
17. "Portrait of a Lady, Called Elizabeth, Lady Tanfield by Unknown Artist" (<http://www.artfund.org/supporting-museums/art-weve-helped-buy/ark:/6393/portrait-of-a-lady-called-elizabeth-lady-tanfield-english-school>). *ArtFund.org*. Art Fund.
18. Harrison, Peter (2001). "Introduction". *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science*. Cambridge University Press. p. 1-10. ISBN 0-521-59196-1.
19. [Littlefield, Henry (1964). "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism". *American Quarterly*, 16 (1): 47-58. doi:10.2307/2710826 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/2710826>).]
20. Baum, L. Frank (2000). *The Annotated Wizard of Oz: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=bpkVEAaUuMkC&pg=PA101>). Norton. p. 101. ISBN 978-0-393-04992-3. Text "author-link-L. Frank Baum " ignored (help)
21. Bogstad, Janice M.; Kaveny, Philip E. (9 August 2011). *Picturing Tolkien: Essays on Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings Film Trilogy* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=jNjKrXRP0G8C&pg=PA189>). McFarland. p. 189. ISBN 978-0-7864-8473-7.
22. [Roppolo, Joseph Patrick. "Meaning and 'The Masque of the Red Death'", collected in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Regan. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967. p. 137]
23. Cäcilia Rentmeister: The Muses, Banned From Their Occupations: Why Are There So Many Allegories Female? [English summary from Kvinnovetenskaplig Tidskrift, Nr.4. 1981, Lund, Sweden as PDF](http://www.cillie-rentmeister.de/themen/english/). Retrieved 10 July 2011 (<http://www.cillie-rentmeister.de/themen/english/>) Original Version in German: *Berufsverbot für die Musen. Warum sind so viele Allegorien weiblich?* In: *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, Nr. 25/1976, S. 92-112. Langfassung in: *Frauen und Wissenschaft. Beiträge zur Berliner Sommeruniversität für Frauen*, Juli 1976, Berlin 1977, S.258-297. With illustrations. [Full Texts Online: Cäcilia \(Cillie\) Rentmeister: publications](http://www.cillie-rentmeister.de/berufsverbot-fuer-die-musen/) (<http://www.cillie-rentmeister.de/berufsverbot-fuer-die-musen/>)

Further reading

- Frye, Northrop (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism*.
- Fletcher, Angus (1964) *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*.
- Foucault, Michel (1966) *The Order of Things*.
- Jain, Champat Rai (1919). *The Key Of Knowledge* (<https://archive.org/details/keyofknowledge>). *Internet Archive* (Second ed.). Allahabad: The Central Jaina Publishing House. Retrieved 17 November 2015.

External links

- *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*: (<http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaBook/tei/DicHist1.xml;chunk.id=dv1-07;toc.depth=1;toc.id=dv1-07;brand=default;query=allegory#1>) Allegory in Literary history
- *Electronic Antiquity*, Richard Levis, "Allegory and the *Eclogues*" (<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/EIAnt/V1N5/levis.html>) Roman definitions of *allegoria* and interpreting Vergil's *Eclogues*.

Retrieved from "<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Allegory&oldid=848920018>"

This page was last edited on 5 July 2018, at 07:47 (UTC).

Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.](#), a non-profit organization.