

Allegory



DEFINITION

What is an allegory? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An allegory is a work that conveys a hidden meaning—usually moral, spiritual, or political—through the use of symbolic characters and events. The story of "The Tortoise and The Hare" is a well-known allegory with a moral that a slow and steady approach (symbolized by the Tortoise) is better than a hasty and overconfident approach (symbolized by the Hare).

Some additional key details about allegory:

- Some allegories have morals that are easy to discern, such as the example of "The Tortoise and The Hare," but others can be so subtle that it becomes unclear whether the author intended for the story to have a double meaning (or be an allegory) at all.
- Although all allegories use [symbolism](#) heavily, not all writing that uses symbolism qualifies as allegory. Allegories are characterized by a use of symbolism that permeates the entire story, to the extent that essentially *all* major characters and their actions can be understood as having symbolic significance.
- An allegory can be long and extend over an entire book or even a series of books, or it can be short or a part of a longer work (such as the Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of Plato's [Republic](#)).

Allegory Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce allegory: **al-ih-gore-ee**

Allegory vs. Symbolism

Allegory and symbolism are often confused, but they are not the same thing.

- **Symbolism** is the use of symbols, usually physical objects, to represent abstract ideas or qualities. For instance, in [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) the mockingbird symbolizes innocence and beauty.
- **Allegory** is a work that makes extensive use of symbolism in order to communicate a broader moral or meaning. Nearly every aspect of an allegory—from characters, to objects, to dialogue, to settings, to major plot events—can typically be interpreted as having a secondary, symbolic meaning that fits into the allegory's broader meaning. For instance, in the 17th-century allegory *Pilgrim's Progress*, the protagonist (named "Christian") and his journey, as well as every other character, object, and location he interacts with along the way, symbolically fit into a larger moral or lesson about the proper "path" to reach heaven.

So, to put it another way: an allegory is a type of work or story that represents some idea, concept, or historical event that is different from the literal events contained within the story. Symbolism is the *technique* that an allegory uses in order to be able to represent and communicate its deeper meaning.

How Allegories Use Symbolism

Allegories use symbolism in all sorts of ways. While the types of symbols in allegories are so varied that it's not possible to categorize them all, it is possible to group them into two broad categories. Characters, events, locations, and objects in allegories usually symbolize:

- **Virtues, vices, or other abstract ideas.** For instance, a crooked banker might symbolize greed, while the character of Mr. Legality in the allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* symbolizes a viewpoint that prioritizes the law over faith in Jesus Christ.
- **Real people and specific historical events.** For example, one character might symbolize Queen Elizabeth I, or two characters might symbolize opposing sides in the American Civil War.

Although the symbolism in some allegories can be quite subtle, it's more often the case that the symbolism is clear or even heavy-handed. For example, Mr. Legality, who symbolizes a mindset focused around the law, is named *Mr. Legality!* Similarly, in Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame*, Lady Fame is the name of a character who determines the social reputations of others.

Not All Symbolism is Allegory

While allegories do involve *a lot* of symbolism, the presence of symbolism in a work does not automatically make that work an allegory. Rather, an allegory is a story in which the *majority* of characters and plot developments serve as symbols for something else, or in which the entire storyline is symbolic of a broader concept, idea, historical event, or phenomenon in society. But a story or poem can contain symbols while not functioning as an allegory. An example might be helpful:

- **Edmund Spenser's poem *The Faerie Queene* is an allegory.** Its characters are not very complex or deep: they're meant to embody virtues or ideas more than they are meant to resemble real people.
- **Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* contains lots of symbolism, but it is *not* an allegory.** The protagonist, Hester Prynne, as well as every other significant character exhibit a great deal of psychological and emotional complexity and individuality. While the novel is full of symbols, the complexity of the characters mean that it wouldn't really make sense to say that *The Scarlet Letter* is an allegory about adultery. Rather, it's a novel that is

literally about characters in Puritan times who are affected by adultery, and the novel also has symbolic aspects to deepen and intensify its various themes.

In short, all allegories are highly symbolic, but not all symbolic writing is allegorical.

Types of Allegory

There are two main types of allegory. The basic technique is the same in both categories, but in each kind characters and events symbolize different things.

- **Historical allegories:** Writing in this category allegorizes historical figures and events. Writers of this kind of allegory may be using symbols to mask the true subject of their writing (for instance, to avoid censorship or punishment), or to effectively distill a complex history into a more simplified and vivid story that will engage readers on an emotional and aesthetic level.
 - A good example of this type of allegory is George Orwell's [Animal Farm](#), which corresponds pretty closely to the events of the Russian revolution.
- **Conceptual allegories:** This kind of allegory uses characters and events to symbolize abstract things rather than actual events or people. For example, it's common for writers of conceptual allegories to use characters that embody particular moral qualities, such as purity or love. Most religious and social allegories fall under this category, since they usually don't have to do with a specific person or historical event, but rather some virtue or vice more generally.
 - In "The Pardoner's Tale," a story in Chaucer's [The Canterbury Tales](#), a character known as the Pardoner asserts that greed is the root of all evil, and illustrates the point using an allegory in which three drunken men set out to find a character known as "Death," but find a small fortune in gold instead. They end up killing each other in an attempt to secure the entire treasure. The three men can be said to embody greed.

It's certainly possible, and not uncommon, for a writer of an allegory to draw elements from both of these two types of allegory.

Allegory vs. Parable

People often confuse allegories with parables—another, similar type of story that makes heavy use of symbolism to convey meaning. But in fact, the two terms mean quite different things. Here are some of the key differences between allegory and parable:

- **Morality:** Parables are didactic, meaning that they are intended to teach the listener something. Therefore, parables always have a moral or a lesson. For instance, religious figures like Jesus and Buddha constantly used parables to impart their beliefs to others. Allegories, by contrast, do not always have a moral: they may

simply be concerned with retelling a historical event from a certain perspective, or with conveying a complex idea about the world without turning it into a lesson.

- **Length:** Parables are always short, whereas an allegory can be as long as an entire book or film.
- **Subtlety:** Since the purpose of parables is to teach a moral lesson, the symbolic meaning of a parable is almost always immediately clear. Like parables, allegories *can* use very blunt symbolism—but *unlike* parables, some allegories can be so subtle that readers don't always even pick up on the symbolic meaning of the text.



EXAMPLES

Allegory in Literature

Allegory is one of the oldest literary forms, with writers long relying on allegory's ability to convey a moral or political message efficiently and discreetly.

Allegory in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

[Animal Farm](#) is a political allegory. It tells the story of the animals on a farm owned by an abusive farmer. One night, a boar named Old Major gathers all the animals of the farm together. Knowing that he will soon die, Old Major gives a speech in which he reveals to the animals that men cause all the misery that animals endure. Old Major says that all animals are equal and urges them to join together to rebel. Old Major dies shortly thereafter, but the farm animals develop his ideas into the philosophy of Animalism, and they defeat the abusive farmer in an uprising, renaming the farm "Animal Farm." What follows is a long story of political turmoil among the animals, with the pigs rising to power and becoming oppressive rulers themselves, amending Old Major's revolutionary statement ("All animals are equal") to a nonsensical one that justifies their dominance ("All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others").

Animal Farm is an allegorical story about communism, the political ideology that promotes the eradication of class and the equality of all people. Old Major symbolizes the fathers of communism, Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, while the hypocritical ruling class of pigs represents the Soviet Government in the wake of the Russian Revolution. George Orwell likely chose to use an allegorical story to attack totalitarianism (rather than attacking it directly or explicitly) because it was such a sensitive political subject at the time that he wrote the book (1944-45).

Allegory in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

In Book II of [Paradise Lost](#), a character known as Sin describes how she gave birth to Death after she was impregnated by Satan (or the devil), who is her own father. Her story is allegorical because each character is highly symbolic, as are their relationships to one another. (For instance, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, death didn't even exist

until Satan tempted the first humans to sin. In that sense, Satan gave rise to Sin, and together the two gave rise to Death.) In this passage, Milton describes Sin giving birth to Death:

At last this odious offspring whom thou seest
Thine own begotten, breaking violent way
Tore through my entrails, that with fear and pain
Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew
Transform'd: but he my inbred enemy
Forth issu'd, brandishing his fatal Dart
Made to destroy: I fled, and cry'd out Death;
Hell trembl'd at the hideous Name, and sigh'd
From all her Caves, and back resounded Death.

Additional Allegories in Literature

Some additional famous allegorical works of literature, and their symbolic meanings, are:

- Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*: A moral allegory about Queen Elizabeth I's reign, and knightly virtues such as temperance.
- John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*: A religious allegory about a Christian's spiritual journey toward finding salvation.
- Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: A complex allegory about the French Revolution, and the Romantic ideal of creativity.
- Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: A social allegory about the alienation of the modern individual in society.

Allegory in Philosophy

For thousands of years, philosophers have expressed their beliefs using allegories, particularly because allegorical narratives are handy for illustrating concepts that might otherwise be too abstract to explain easily.

Symbolism in *Plato's Cave*

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" is a classic and well-known example of allegory. Consider the following lines, spoken by Socrates:

Imagine this: People live under the earth in a cavelike dwelling. Stretching a long way up toward the daylight is its entrance, toward which the entire cave is gathered. The people have been in this dwelling since childhood, shackled by the legs and neck..Thus they stay in the same place so that there is only one thing for them to look that: whatever they encounter in front of their faces. But because they are shackled, they are unable to turn their heads around.

It becomes apparent later in his dialogue that Socrates' imaginary prisoners are actually symbolic representations of the average person. The prisoners in his cave may perceive only what is dictated by their circumstances—for example, while in bondage, they cannot

perceive the sun. Likewise, people cannot access certain information about the universe by relying on their senses alone. Thus, Plato posits the existence of a higher reality that can't be conceived of as long as people continue to believe that what they are capable of perceiving is all that is real.

Allegory in Film

There is a long tradition of allegorical movies that represent historical figures or moral qualities through a series of symbols.

Allegory in *Pan's Labyrinth*

Guillermo del Toro's 2006 dark fantasy film is set during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, and chronicles the journey of a girl named Ofelia into a fairy underworld she discovers near her home. In the haunting final [scene](#), the young Ofelia refuses to harm an innocent person, even though it will cost her the kingdom she had been promised by a mythical fawn, and ultimately her life. Though none of the characters in the film are actual historical figures, they symbolize the opposing sides of the Spanish Civil War. If Ofelia is an allegorical figure for Spanish resistance to tyranny, her calculating stepfather (who is a captain on the side of the country's military dictator) represents Spanish officials' all-consuming pursuit of power and blind allegiance to the ideals of the dictatorship.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Authors might choose to write allegories for a number of reasons, and it's certainly possible that an author might choose to write an allegory for more than one of the reasons below.

- **To address a controversial topic:** There are certain topics that are difficult to discuss directly in writing—for example, it might be too controversial or impolite to refer directly to sensitive and ongoing political developments. Because an allegory masks its commentary behind another story, it can make it easier for a writer to make his or her points without angering an audience.
- **To make something more interesting:** Readers might find it hard to pay attention to an essay on, say, the right way to behave to reach heaven, or the evils of the Soviet Union. *Pilgrim's Progress* in the 17th century and *Animal Farm* in the 20th century used allegory to address both of these topics, and achieved extreme popularity. By presenting a story that illustrates a moral or idea rather than explaining it directly, writers can make their audience more likely to engage with—and ultimately absorb—the message they're trying to convey.
- **To make something more understandable:** Allegories can make complex ideas concrete, and therefore more understandable to readers. Plato's Allegory of the Cave, for instance, illustrates both a complex philosophical idea about reality and a similarly complex psychological lesson about the ways that people resist hearing an

unfamiliar truth. The allegory captures all this, and makes both ideas more digestible.

- **Because it's fun:** Reading (and writing) an allegory can feel like solving a little puzzle, where every element of the story has a second meaning to be deciphered.

allegory can be so subtle that some viewers may not even register that a story is an allegory even if they've heard it a dozen times.

- [Wikipedia entry on *Pilgrim's Progress*](#): The entry covers the symbolism within the allegory in great detail.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Allegory](#): Has a rather broad view of allegory that ignores the focus on narrative adopted by critics and reflected in our guide. Still, this is a good overview of classical allegories with a useful discussion on visual allegory in painting.
- [Slate's "Save the Allegory!"](#): A more personal take on the literary device, with a clear sense of what allegory *is not*. A good read after you've spent some time familiarizing yourself with classical allegories, like Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.
- [Taste of Cinema's 10 Brilliant Films Used as Allegories for Social and Political Issues](#): A helpful list, which underscores the fact that

HOW TO CITE

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