

ALLEGORY

An allegory is a configuration of *signs* or *symbols* or both at once.

“Who has got to the meaning of this great allegory--the world? Then we pygmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended.” (Melville to Hawthorne). Allegory is the most difficult to understand of all basic traditional *literary* concepts, setting aside the transitory jargon of Politically Correct anti-literary “Theory” during the last thirty years of the 20th century—“deconstruction” and all such nonsense. Most academics think of allegory only as a pattern of *signs*, rather than as a configuration of *symbols*. A *sign* is an image that represents or embodies one idea in a simple one-to-one relationship, like a traffic stop sign: Careful child looks both ways before stepping into the street and crosses safely; Careless Child does not look both ways and gets run over by a bus. In contrast, a *symbol* radiates a number of implications consistent with all the other implications in a configuration. Any narrative becomes allegorical as soon as it implies a pattern or configuration of correspondences between images and ideas. Commercials are often allegories of *signs*, whereas dreams are allegories of *symbols*.

Most literature teachers do not see allegory unless it is explicit or obvious, especially those inclined to be political—which is nearly all of them now. Then they complain that the allegory is too explicit or obvious. Even some prominent critics have been obtuse about allegory, the most intellectual dimension of the narrative art, present to some degree in works by many authors. Because they do not see it many critics disdain allegory, just as many disbelieve in the spiritual dimension. Even some great writers disparaged allegory while trying to write it. Neither Poe nor Henry James could interpret Hawthorne’s allegories, both disparaged allegory and yet both wrote allegories themselves.

Several allegories coincide in outstanding works such as Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” and Welty’s “A Worn Path.” Likewise rare in their deep complexity, *Moby-Dick* and *The Blithedale Romance* contain archetypal, social, religious, quest, psychological, and allusive allegories that coincide. Hawthorne inherited a Puritan frame of mind disposed to allegory by religion, seeing Nature in every detail as the coherent symbolic art of God. In *Moby-Dick* Ishmael discovers many “linked analogies” between human psychology—“the soul of Man”—and Nature. In philosophy Emerson influenced writers including Thoreau, Whitman, Robinson, Frost, Dickinson and Cather to think allegorically with his pronouncement that “Nature is the symbol of Spirit.”

TYPES OF ALLEGORY

- (1) *Archetypal* allegory: Any narrative may become allegorical if it contains archetypal settings—City/Garden/Wilderness/Sky--and common experiences. The journey into the Wilderness or the struggle to get ahead in the City, for example: “Rip Van Winkle,” *The Leatherstocking Saga*, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, “Bartleby the Scrivener,” *Sister Carrie*, and “A Worn Path” are examples of archetypal *and* social allegory. Each of them dramatizes a pattern of general correspondences to what most readers experience to some extent in their own lives. Each is a challenge to the reader to recognize the correspondences to himself or herself through empathetic identification with characters. On the contrary, Postmodernists are into their own “identities” and differentiate themselves from others rather than identifying with them.
- (2) *Social* allegory: A narrative dramatizes social issues with representative character types: An American girl abroad is too independent for her own good in *Daisy Miller*; a young married woman liberates herself from responsibility but is too weak to live as a rebel in *The Awakening*; another romantic young woman is too brazen to survive in New York society in *The House of Mirth*; a capable woman is frustrated in her efforts to bring culture to her provincial town in *Main Street*. A poor black male becomes a murderer in *Native Son*. All these stories are allegorical in corresponding to commonly recognized patterns of behavior in society. Social allegories are often historical novels corresponding to famous real cases, such as *An American Tragedy* by Dreiser and *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy.

- (3) *Philosophical* allegory: Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (514-20 B.C.) illustrates his theory that most people see reality as if they are in a cave looking at shadows on the back wall, whereas the true reality is eternal "Ideas" in a spiritual dimension imperfectly manifest in the material world outside the cave. All things in this world correspond to Ideas in the spiritual dimension. Plato's theory is a pagan prefiguration of Christian dualism.
- (4) *Religious* allegory: A parable is a short allegory. The most influential allegories in history are the parables of Jesus Christ. The correspondence between image and idea in allegory expresses the dualism of this material world and the spiritual dimension. Asked by His disciples to explain His parable of the sower, Christ answered, "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares [weeds] are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world." (*Matthew* 13:37-40) This is an allegory of *signs* and also an allegory of archetypal *symbols* because the images are elemental in Nature and the action is so common. Most stories in the *Bible* are likewise allegories in which the *signs* are also archetypal *symbols*, starting with Adam and Eve. Otherwise the book of *Exodus*, *Paradise Lost* (1667-74) by Milton, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) by Bunyan, and above all the life story of Jesus are the most influential religious allegories in the history of America. "The Celestial Railroad" (1843) by Hawthorne is an analogue to *Pilgrim's Progress* that satirizes liberal Unitarians.
- (5) *Quest* allegory: The medieval legend of the quest for the Holy Grail is the prototype of quest allegories, the basis of "The Waste Land" (1922) by T. S. Eliot, the most influential poem of the 20th century. *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1620-47) by Bradford combines religious allegory with the quest for a new life in America. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is a perfect religious allegory of symbols dramatizing the quest for salvation. The more correspondences there are between concrete details and ideas the more perfect the allegory. Melville learned to write clear allegory from Hawthorne, but he had become a questing agonistic. As Hawthorne put it, Melville "had no definite belief." Hence, *Mardi* (1849) and *Moby-Dick* (1851) are quest allegories—journeys at sea in pursuit of Truth. Ishmael's journey is an allegory of his individuation process and the salvation he attains in the end is psychological.
- (6) *Psychological* allegory analyzes the psyche in the tradition of dream allegory, one of the most common literary forms during the Middle Ages. Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) is a dream allegory, the portrait of a Puritan mind confused and his soul damned by belief in the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. "Roger Malvin's Burial" (1832) is a similar portrait of a young Puritan confused by the same doctrine, who nevertheless is saved. This is the first work of American literature to portray the archetypal individuation process in quest of wholeness. In contrast, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1840) by Poe portrays the disintegration of Roderick Usher's psyche—symbolized by his house. Roderick (sensitivity) is the Romantic poet/painter in quest of the Ideal, which in Poe's vision necessitates transcending Reason (the narrator) and results in the wasting away of his body (sister Madeline). *Moby-Dick* is a psychological allegory in that everything may be understood as happening in the psyche of Ishmael, as in a dream. Melville called *Billy Budd* (1891) an "inside narrative"—a psychological allegory. Through Captain Vere the story dramatizes the tragic necessity of sacrificing innocence in order to survive in a warring world. Some of Eugene O'Neill's plays are inside narratives. Each of the four sections of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by Faulkner corresponds ironically to a stage in human development, making the conflicts among the Compson brothers an allegory dramatizing the disintegration of the modern mind: Benjy the literal idiot (child), Quentin the idiotic idealistic student (adolescent), Jason the grasping idiotic materialist (adult).
- (7) *Allusive* allegory makes explicit or implicit correspondences to a previous narrative. Near the end of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) Gatsby is compared to an ex-slave in ancient Rome: "His career as Trimalchio was over." This one allusion evokes a series of implicit correspondences between the legend of Trimalchio and the legend of Gatsby, both of whom are remembered mainly for giving extravagant parties. Similarly, in *Moby-Dick* Melville compares Ahab to a number of different

monster hunters. In *The Prairie* (1827) Cooper develops over a dozen correspondences between Natty Bumppo and Moses. The most extreme example of allegorical allusiveness, with by far the most correspondences, is *Ulysses* (1922) by Joyce. No one else has been so systematic and comprehensive. T. S. Eliot, whose “The Waste Land” (1922) is also allusive allegory, lauded *Ulysses* in a review and said its “mythic method” was the only means of presenting the modern world in literature. The “mythic method” became a characteristic of Modernism—as in O’Neill, Faulkner, and Welty.

- (8) *Mock-quest* allegory is parody by Postmodernists who do not believe in truth, the soul, or God—Pynchon, Barth, and the other cynical fantasists. Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) is the best-known example of mock-quest allegory.

Michael Hollister (2015)

HANDBOOK DEFINITIONS

“Greek *allegoria*. A description of one thing under the guise of another suggestively similar. Following the *Roman de la Rose*, allegory is the accepted poetic form of the medieval poem, as seen in Chaucer’s *The House of Fame*. Perhaps the most obvious example in English is John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, which describes the adventures of the human soul in the guise of a journey. The moral meaning of the allegory is clear in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and in the fifteenth-century play *Everyman*.”

A. F. Scott
Current Literary Terms

“Allegory is a type of extended and elaborated metaphor.... Yvor Winters has designated Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as pure allegory, asserting that the major characters stand for various degrees of repentance.... The only works that would qualify as pure allegory would be such works as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, where, for example, the character of Christian stands precisely for the concept of Christian salvation and the character Evangelist stands for evangelism. The exception might be a work like Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, where all the components stand for abstractions outside the work, but in a symbolic rather than a literal way.”

M. M. Liberman & Edward E. Foster
A Modern Lexicon of Literary Terms

“A form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. Thus, it represents one thing in the guise of another.... By a process of double signification. Allegory often clarifies this process by giving patently meaningful names to persons and places. The characters are usually personifications of abstract qualities, the action and the setting representative of the relationships among these abstractions. Allegory attempts to evoke a dual interest... The test is that these materials be so employed that they represent meanings independent of the action in the surface story... Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* describes the efforts of a Christian to achieve a godly life by triumphing over inner obstacles to his faith, these obstacles being represented by outward objects such as the Slough of Despond and Vanity Fair.”

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature (6th edition)

Authentic symbols arise naturally. They are most effective when organic as distinct from artificial or merely cultural, with exceptions in some cases where the symbol is given enough context, such as the billboard for Dr. T. J. Eckleburg in *The Great Gatsby*, which picks up resonance from its setting in the ash heap wasteland, in the tradition of "The Waste Land." A natural symbol means what it is by nature, not as contrived by an author. In Sherwood Anderson's "The Egg," for example, the egg represents the possibility of a new life, therefore promise and hope--by extension in context, the American Dream.

The Puritans impose a reductive *sign* on Hester Prynne. Over the years her good works reverse the meaning of the A in the public mind from Adulteress to Able. Meanwhile, Hawthorne analyzes the A as a *sign* that becomes a *symbol* in various contexts, forming a complex allegory. For example, as a mirror of Hester's soul, Pearl both reflects her mother's sin and represents her potential salvation. She is complex, a *symbol* personifying opposite ideas--Evil and Good. If she were merely a *sign*, she would be reduced to one idea, merely an embodiment of Evil. Likewise in "The Minister's Black Veil," the veil is a *sign* evoking the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity imposed by the minister on himself, with some evil effects that Hawthorne dramatizes in an allegory of *symbols*. See also "Young Goodman Brown" and almost any fiction by Hawthorne, who inherited a Puritan frame of mind--seeing history and the world and every detail of Nature as the symbolic art of God. Other such allegorical fiction writers include Melville, Hemingway, Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty.