

# Allegory in Literature: History, Definition & Examples

## What Is an Allegory?

When is a story more than just a story? When it's an allegory. Sometimes authors deliberately tell their stories on two levels: a literal level and a figurative level. In an **allegory**, authors use their characters, setting and plot to entertain, while simultaneously delivering a moral, lesson, or even a commentary on big concepts, like religion, and institutions, like the government. For example, a story about aliens who find themselves isolated and alone in a strange new world can be an allegory for what immigrants experience in a new country.

One way to think about allegories is as extended metaphors, or comparisons, between two things, usually regarded as unlike. Since they are intended to make big concepts much more accessible, allegories are not always obvious. Once clued in to the author's larger purpose, though, the ordinary becomes symbolic; space aliens stand in for immigrants.

We get the word 'allegory' from the Latin word '*allegoria*,' taken from the Greek word for 'veiled language.' Think of an allegory as an umbrella term for stories with deeper meaning - stories that are more than stories. Some allegories are very heavily veiled and might require an English professor to explain them to you. Other allegories are fairly straightforward.

## Fables and Parables

A specific type of allegory, the **fable**, has been around for thousands of years as part of an oral storytelling tradition present in all cultures. Fables use animals and objects as characters to tell a story and deliver a lesson. By using animals to represent humans, storytellers are able to indirectly criticize human behavior. However, since fables tend to be short and have a quickly identifiable lesson, they are of the more straightforward variety of allegory.

For example, the story of *The Grasshopper and the Ant* compares the hardworking ant and the lazy grasshopper. The ant saves up food for the winter months, while the grasshopper plays. Instead of directly telling people bad things will happen to you if you don't work hard and plan for the future, the fable veils the message just enough to make the lesson more palatable. Really, when was the last time you were truly motivated by someone telling you to save more money? *The Grasshopper and the Ant* is one of several well-known fables attributed to a Greek slave named Aesop who lived around 600 BC.

Another type of allegory, **the parable**, is also part of a storytelling tradition and can be found just as far back in history as the fable. Like the fable, the parable is another type of allegorical story that delivers a clear message about human behavior in the hopes of getting people to act differently. It differs from the fable in that it uses people as characters rather than animals. This makes the parable much more direct than the fable, and the least veiled of all the allegories. Direct and with a clear, moral or spiritual message, it is no surprise that parables are found in Christian, Islamic and Jewish texts. The parables of Jesus in the New Testament of the Bible are short, instructive stories whose titles are often enough to convey their main ideas: *The Good Samaritan*, *The Good Shepherd*, and the parable of *The Faithful Servant*.

## Other Famous Examples

Unlike fables and parables, most allegories are much more veiled. These stories are longer and more complicated than the simple tales of *The Grasshopper and the Ant* and the parable of *The Good Samaritan*. They often require some background knowledge and a willingness to see beyond the literal.

In Plato's *The Republic* (380 BC), there is a very famous allegory often referred to as 'The Allegory of the Cave', where the cave stands for more than just a cave. Instead, the cave is the setting for an extended metaphor about how a philosopher comes to see the world. Like people in a dark cave, who never see anything but shadows on a wall, we are blind to how things really are. Philosophers, however, are able to see things outside the cave, as they really are. Freed from the cave, their perception of the world is altered.

Published in 1678, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a book-length allegory written by British author John Bunyan. The story focuses on the journey of a character named Christian who travels from his home to the Celestial City, which is meant to represent heaven, obviously. With a main character named Christian, it isn't hard to see what religion we are talking about here. Along the way, Christian the Christian meets other characters with names like Faithful, Mercy and Hopeful, and they travel through places like the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Subtle, right?

## Summary

An **allegory** is a literary device used to tell stories on two levels: the literal and the figurative. The literal level is the plot, characters and setting. The figurative level is what these elements represent. For example, on a literal level, George Orwell's novella, *Animal Farm* (1946), is about a group of animals who rise up against their human owners and form their own socialist government. From a

figurative point of view, the animals represent members of the Soviet Communist Party, and the events of the story are a criticism of their behavior.

*Animal Farm* is a **fable**, or a type of allegory, that uses animals and other non-human characters to deliver a message, lesson or commentary. Another type of allegory is **the parable**, which has only human characters and is even more straightforward than the fable. Many allegories, like 'The Allegory of the Cave', are much more subtle and require some background knowledge to uncover their symbolic meaning.

# Allegory in Literature: Questions

1. How can we distinguish fables from parables?

- A. The only characters in fables are animals.
- B. Fables tend to be found mostly in religious teachings.
- C. Parables tend to be much more direct in conveying their meaning.
- D. Fables are more popular than parables.

2. Why are parables told?

- A. To convince people of the truth of a religious tradition.
- B. As a form of commentary.
- C. To alter people's behavior.
- D. To entertain children.

3. Which of the following statements about allegories is FALSE?

- A. They can vary in terms of how straightforward or subtle they are.
- B. They can be thought of as extended metaphors.
- C. They deliver a moral, lesson, or commentary.
- D. They only tell stories on a figurative level.

4. How are fables and parables similar?

- A. They're both used in religious teachings.
- B. They're both mainly a feature of European literary traditions.
- C. They both generally feature animals.
- D. They're both rooted in traditions of oral storytelling.

5. The Pilgrim's Progress is an example of a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. allegory
- B. symbol
- C. fable
- D. parable