



Allegory

What Is Allegory?

An allegory is a story that alludes to other literary works or comments on common conditions of life. When a work or its passages are allegorical, they are similar to an event, character or setting in a story that is universally known: a fable, a parable in the Bible, or a Greek myth. Allegories have two levels of narration occurring at the same time: the actual events, characters and setting presented in the story, and the ideas they are intended to convey or the significance they bear.

Three literary forms that you might use when discussing allegory:

- **Fable.** A fable is a short story, often featuring animals with human traits, to which writers attach morals or explanations.
- **Parable.** Parables are most often associated with Jesus Christ, who used them in His teachings. They are short narratives that exemplify religious truths or insights.
- **Myth.** Myths are stories, either short or long, that are often associated with religion and philosophy and with various races and cultures. They embody the social and cultural values of the civilization during which they were written.

When writing about allegory, determine whether all or part of the story is allegorical.

- **Sustained allegory.** This occurs when a story's allegory continues throughout the work, from beginning to end. The sole purpose is to convey the dominant idea. The idea is emphasized rather than the story's actual (literal) details. For example, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a story about Christian's difficult journey from his home in the City of Destruction to his new home in the Heavenly City. But the main idea is about the rigors and trials of Christian life.
- **Episodic allegory.** This occurs when a story contains an allegorical episode or passage. The passage is based on both the actual (literal) events in the story and the allegorical elements. For example, during one scene in the film "Star Wars," Darth Vader imprisons Luke Skywalker, and Skywalker must exert all his skill and strength to get free and to overcome Vader. This temporary imprisonment signifies those moments of doubt and discouragement that people experience while trying to overcome obstacles.

Similar heroic deeds have been represented allegorically in the stories of Jason and the Argonauts and Beowulf and Grendel.

When analyzing allegory, ask yourself the following questions:

- **The application of allegory.** Does the allegory (fable, parable, myth) refer to anything or anyone specific? Does it refer to an action or particular period of history? Or does the allegory refer to human tendencies or ideas? Does it illustrate, point by point, particular philosophies or religions? If the allegory seems outdated, how much can be applied for people living today?
- **The consistency of allegory.** Is the allegory maintained consistently throughout the work, or is it intermittently used? Explain and detail this use.

Do extra reading and research:

To understand allegorical implications in a story, you have to become familiar with the source of the similarities. Allegorical sources include world history, classic works of literature, and archetypal ideas, such as the “quest” or “coming of age.” You might need to use a dictionary, encyclopedia, or other reference book. For example, you would not recognize that the musical “West Side Story” is allegorical unless you were aware of its similarities to a classic work of literature: *Romeo and Juliet*. Thus, to see certain implications in “West Side Story,” you have to have a general grasp of Shakespeare’s play.

Remember:

As long as the similarities are close and consistent, your allegorical interpretations of the story will be valid.