

Allegory

Allegory Definition

Allegory is a [figure of speech](#) in which abstract ideas and principles are described in terms of characters, figures, and events. It can be employed in [prose](#) and poetry to tell a story, with a purpose of teaching or explaining an idea or a principle. The objective of its use is to teach some kind of a [moral](#) lesson.

Difference Between Allegory and Symbolism

Although an allegory uses symbols, it is different from [symbolism](#). An allegory is a complete [narrative](#) that involves characters and events that stand for an abstract idea or event. A [symbol](#), on the other hand, is an object that stands for another object, giving it a particular meaning. Unlike allegory, symbolism does not tell a story. For example, Plato, in his *Allegory of Cave*, tells a story of how some people are ignorant, while at the same time other people “see the light.” Plato’s allegory stands for an idea and does not tell an actual story.

Examples of Allegory in Everyday Life

Allegory is an archaic term, which is used specifically in literary works. It is difficult to spot its occurrence in everyday life, although recently we do find examples of allegory in political debates. The declaration of former U.S. President George W. Bush was allegorical when he used the term “Axis of Evil” in referring to three countries considered a danger to the world. He later used the term “allies” for those countries that would wage war against the “Axis.”

Examples of Allegory in Literature

Example #1: *Animal Farm* (By George Orwell)

Animal Farm, written by George Orwell, is an allegory that uses animals on a farm to describe the overthrow of the last Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, and the Communist Revolution of Russia before WW I. The actions of the animals on the farm are used to expose the greed and corruption of the revolution. It also describes how powerful people can change the ideology of a society. One of the cardinal rules on the farm is this:

“All animals are equal but a few are more equal than others.”

The animals on the farm represent different sections of Russian society after the revolution.

For instance, the pigs represent those who came to power following the revolution; “Mr. Jones,” the owner of the farm, represents the overthrown Tsar Nicholas II; while “Boxer” the horse, represents the laborer class. The use of allegory in the novel allows Orwell to make his position clear about the Russian Revolution and expose its evils.

Example #2: *Faerie Queen* (By Edmund Spenser)

Faerie Queen, a masterpiece of Edmund Spenser, is a moral and religious allegory.

The good characters of book stand for the various virtues, while the bad characters represent vices. “The Red-Cross Knight” represents holiness, and “Lady Una” represents truth, wisdom, and goodness. Her parents symbolize the human race. The “Dragon,” which has imprisoned them, stands for evil.

The mission of holiness is to help the truth fight evil, and thus regain its rightful place in the hearts of human beings. “The Red-Cross Knight” in this poem also represents the reformed church of England, fighting against the “Dragon,” which stands for the Papacy or the Catholic Church.

Example #3: *Pilgrim’s Progress* (By John Bunyan)

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is an example of spiritual allegory. The ordinary sinner, Christian, leaves the City of Destruction, and travels towards Celestial City, where God resides, for salvation. He finds Faithful, a companion who helps him on his way to the City. On many instances, many characters, including Hypocrisy, Apollyon, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Obstinate, and Pliable try to discourage or stop him from achieving his aim. Finally, he reaches the Celestial City, carried by Hopeful's faith.

The moral learned through this allegory is that the road to Heaven is not easy, and it is full of obstacles. A Christian has to be willing to pay any price to achieve salvation. A man is full of sins, but this does not stop him from achieving glory.

Function of Allegory

Writers use allegory to add different layers of meanings to their works. Allegory makes their stories and characters multidimensional, so that they stand for something larger in meaning than what they literally stand for. Allegory allows writers to put forward their moral and political points of view. A careful study of an allegorical piece of writing can give us an insight into its writer's mind, how he views the world, and how he wishes the world to be.