

allegory (Gr *allēgoria* other speaking) An allegory is a fiction told in such a way as to indicate, by 'aptly suggestive resemblance' (*OED*), a clear structure of nonfictional ideas. It is presented, therefore, as being secondary to a meaning that the reader must try to recover by engaging the text in interpretative play.

Allegory differs from the related forms, parable and fable, by including in its narrative conspicuous directions for interpretation (such as naming the serpent of *FQ* 1 i 18 'Errorr'). Whereas in parable or fable we are offered a complete (and sometimes surprising) interpretation when the story is over, in allegory we find only the iconic rudiments of an interpretation we must build for ourselves, within certain constraints, as we proceed. This has two important consequences: it allows an allegorical narrative to develop at much greater length, and it promotes a sustained interaction between reader and text that has many of the features of a game.

Letter to Raleigh In describing *The Faerie Queene* as a 'continued Allegory, or darke conceit' (Letter to Raleigh), Spenser joins two distinct notions of allegory derived from antiquity, one having its origin in the technical analysis of figures of speech, the other in philosophical interpretations of Homer.

According to the first, or rhetorical, notion, allegory is defined as a metaphor carried on at unusual length, as when troubles in the state are described in terms of a ship in a storm. Its proper pleasure is in recognizing clearly how each thing in a narrative wittily corresponds to some other thing in its meaning. Thus Puttenham writes, in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), '*Allegoria* is when we do speake in sence translative and wrested from the owne signification, nevertheless applied to another not altogether contrary [which would be *irony*], but having much conveniencie with it' (3.18). This account is closely modeled upon that of Quintilian (1st century AD), whose famous definition of allegory as 'continued metaphor' Puttenham repeats (*Institutio oratoria* 9.2.46; cf 8.6.44).

According to the second, or hermeneutic, notion (Gr *hermēneia* interpretation), allegory is seen as a code by which philosophical and spiritual ideas are hidden in mythical tales: 'there are many mysteries contained in poetry,' Sidney confides, 'which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane

wits it should be abused' (*Defence*, ed 1973b:121). Here the proper pleasure is in obscurity, sublimity, and fullness: the sense that the truth beyond the veil of narrative would not be sufficiently valued unless gotten with effort (Augustine *De doctrina christiana* 2.6.8); that this truth, at its highest, is incomprehensible except through indirect images and tales (Dante *Epistolae* 10.29, ed 1966:193); and that no interpretation can state the meaning in full because the truth of the book is, finally, the truth of the world (Boccaccio *Genealogia* 14.10, 12, 17).

Because Spenser's phrase 'continued Allegory, or darke conceit' recapitulates traditional ideas of allegory that are themselves in need of critical analysis, it should be taken not as an objective description of the poem before us but rather as an indication of how the poet would like us to respond. Spenser is not telling us how to classify his poem: he is telling us how to enjoy it.

To see allegory in the terms proposed in this article, as a game designed by the writer and played by the reader, will elucidate another remark in the Letter: that *The Faerie Queene* is intended to 'fashion' its reader in 'vertuous and gentle discipline.' The reader is to be morally changed not just by seeing examples of admirable conduct but by becoming engaged, through the play of interpretation, in the theory of virtue. Spenser's allegorical writing, like Dante's, fashions an intellectual habit.

interpretative play Traditionally, critics have set out to define what allegory is in isolation from how it is engaged by a reader; and they have sought, in consequence, to locate its doubleness of sense inside the text. Even Coleridge thinks of the allegorical text as controlling two carefully articulated lines of development: one set forth explicitly as narrative addressed to the eye while the other, having primary authority, is 'folded in,' or implied, by analogies addressed to the mind. Such a definition tries to be more objective than it is here possible to be. For by focusing on the work in itself, and its presumably inflexible meaning, the most salient feature of allegory is ignored: its deliberate and continuous provocation of what has been called 'the restructuring of the text by each reader' (Honig 1959:29).

Although we are expected to think of the 'darke conceit' as a presence hidden inside the text, more detached analysis will show that it is a convention or rule governing information around a circuit: the narrative is accompanied by iconic details suggesting a deeper meaning inside it, these details are used by the reader to incorporate other elements of the narrative into a comprehensive structure of meaning, and this structure is in turn modified and enriched by further reading. Thus it seems as if the reader, by reorganizing the experience of the narrative into a more coherent pattern of ideas, draws closer to truth while reading further.

The illusion that the meaning of an allegory resides somewhere inside its text is most persuasive, however, when the range of possible interpretations is narrow. For this reason, allegorical poets often will begin with a

fairly obvious conceit so that we will imagine an objective meaning throughout, even when we cannot see what it is. Langland, for instance, tells a fable of rats who discuss hanging a bell on the cat, but tells it in such a way that we recognize easily his political subject ('Prologue' 146-207). Spenser likewise keys our expectations of *The Faerie Queene* as a whole by showing, in its first episode, a knight and a woman-serpent engaged in a struggle that can easily be interpreted as the conflict of holiness and spiritual error.

Episodes such as these may persuade us, by extension, that a work conceals inside itself a clear train of thought that is carried through from beginning to end. In complex allegories, notably those of Dante and Spenser, we seem to be directed, through the process of interpretation, toward a point where all mystery is dispelled in the presence of truth. But what we encounter instead is a point where all further progress is blocked by the inadequacy of language to express something that is always beyond it. It is here that the allegorical poet will stage the breakdown of language into paradox (*FQ* VII vii 13) or will insist that to get past the barrier it is necessary to resort to 'shadowy prefaces' (*Paradiso* 30.78) directing the mind of the reader beyond them. Such images are presented as the steps of a ladder that will be discarded when we have climbed it. Thus the effect of 'secondariness' which is cultivated by allegory is at once sublime (because we seem to participate in the essence of meaning) and frustrating (because we cannot express it).

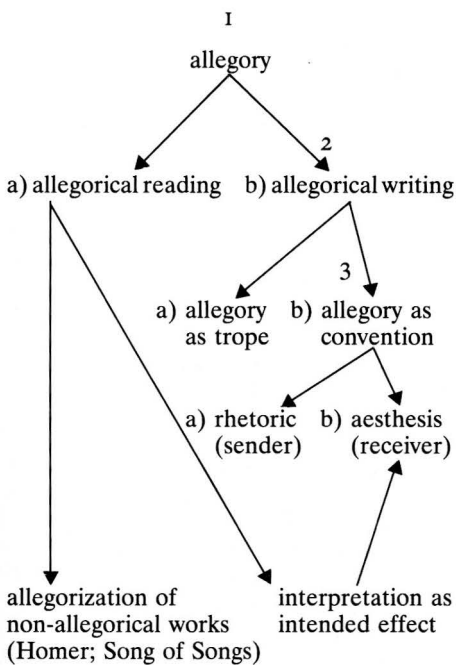
The existence of an ineffable center of meaning where all interpretations seem to converge is something that the reader is encouraged to accept in order to enjoy the process of trying to get there. Even in cases where the meaning is clear, as in satirical allegories such as Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, Arbuthnot's *History of John Bull*, or Addison's allegory of true and false wit (*Spectator* 63), what gives pleasure is the opportunity of playing with the terms of the comparison, and not the prospect of discarding the narrative once we have laid bare its hidden kernel of truth. While the object of chess is to checkmate the opponent's king, the purpose of the game is rigorous, combinative play - which is a fair description also of how an allegory compels us to read. To engage in this sort of play we must enter into a *convention of secondariness* wherein it is assumed that the allegorical text exists only to reach toward something outside its reach.

three distinctions Any narrative, from the Song of Solomon to *Alice in Wonderland*, may be made to mean something other than itself by fanciful interpretation, even when its author could not possibly have intended, or understood, the new meaning. Some narratives, however, are written to encourage readers to interpret in a particular way: hence the first distinction between *allegorical reading* and *allegorical writing*.

The second distinction shows the two aspects of *allegorical writing*: *allegory as convention*, where an entire work is presented as

being secondary to a meaning that is always outside it, and *allegory as trope*, a more limited, rhetorical device forming the texture of narrative in allegorical works. Allegorical tropes can appear also in works, such as the epics of Homer and Virgil, that are not allegorical throughout. Typical kinds of allegorical tropes are personified abstractions such as Furor in the *Aeneid* (I.294), extended metaphors such as the lame Prayers who come after swift-footed Atē, or Madness (*Iliad* 9.502), and significant buildings such as Spenser's house of Alma (*FQ* II ix).

The third distinction separates *allegory as convention* into *allegorical rhetoric* and *allegorical aesthesis*. *Allegorical rhetoric* includes everything a writer may do to make the reader interpret the narrative in a particular way. *Allegorical aesthesis* describes how that process of interpretation actually works in the reader, who translates the narrative into conceptual form.



In practice it is hard to make *allegorical rhetoric* and *allegorical aesthesis* stand clearly apart because the distinction between them accounts only crudely for what is really an uninterrupted circuit of play between reader and text. A gap in the text – between, for instance, the image of a serpent vomiting books and the notion of theological error – is first taken out of the narrative by the reader and then reconstituted abstractly as an opposition between a sign and its meaning. In so doing, the reader is sensitized to a new gap that has been opened between this interpretative opposition and the rest of the narrative from which it has been taken. The reader therefore uses that opposition to absorb further experience of the text into a larger structure of meaning wherein no gap or inconsistency between narrative and truth will be felt. Yet while the goal of interpretation is to eradicate all signifying difference in a motionless ideal, the very work of moving toward that ideal opens more spaces than it can close. The true

purpose, therefore, of that increasingly problematic structure of meaning which we accumulate as we read is not to capture the truth but to engage us in further, and more powerful, interpretative play.

This is most apparent in allegories like *The Faerie Queene* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which provide more scope and flexibility for the process of interaction between reader and text. By introducing traditional ideas and symbols into the narrative and leaving precise relations between them unstated, several broad contexts of meaning are offered within which the reader may construct several interpretations of the same passage; and for any or all of these responses the reader will find confirmation by reading further. It thus becomes possible to think that there are, beneath the surface of the text, discrete levels of meaning that will eventually converge on the truth.

To understand how allegory works as an imaginative system – that is, to construct a *poetics* of allegory – we must detach ourselves from this belief in a definitive meaning so that we can observe from outside how it regulates the loop of interpretative play. In short, we are concerned not with the truth of the belief but with how it works as a convention.