

Parables and Fables: From Symbolism to Allegory?

Parables and fables are easily confused with one another. Symbolism and allegory are similarly mixed-up in too many students' minds. Here's the difference.

In common parlance, a **parable** is a story or short narrative designed to reveal allegorically some religious principle, moral lesson, psychological reality, or general truth. Rather than using abstract discussion, a parable always teaches by comparison with real or literal occurrences--especially "homey" everyday occurrences a wide number of people can relate to. The word *parable* comes from Greek term παράβολή (*pará* means "beside," plus βολή, which means "a casting, putting, throwing, turning"), which the Romans called *parabola* in classical rhetoric. Well-known examples of parables include those found in the synoptic Gospels, such as "The Prodigal Son" and "The Good Samaritan." In some Gospel versions, the parables are announced with the phrase, "The Kingdom of God is like" Technically speaking, biblical "parables" were originally examples of a Hebrew *genre* called *meshalim* (singular *mashal*), a word lacking a counter-part in Greek, Latin or English. *Meshalim* in Hebrew refer to "mysterious speech," i.e., spiritual riddles or enigmas the speaker couches in story-form. It is only in the Greek New Testament that these *meshalim* are conflated with allegorical readings. Non-religious works may serve as parables as well. For example, Melville's *Billy Budd* demonstrates that absolute good --such as the impressionable, naïve young sailor--may not co-exist with absolute evil--the villain Claggart.

Fable: A fable is also a brief story illustrating a moral. Unlike the parables, fables often include talking animals or animated objects as the principal characters. The interaction of these animals or inanimate things reveals general truths about human nature, i.e., a person can learn practical lessons from the fictional antics in a fable. However, the lesson learned is not allegorical. Each animal is not necessarily a symbol for something else. Instead, the reader learns the lesson as an *exemplum*--an example of what one should or should not do. The sixth century (BCE) Greek writer Aesop is most famous as an author of fables, but Phaedrus and Babrius in the first century (CE) expanded on his works. A famous collection of Indian fables was the Sanskrit *Bidpai* (circa 300 CE), and in the medieval period, Marie de France (c. 1200 CE) composed 102 fables in verse. After the 1600s, fables increasingly became common as a form of children's literature.

Symbolism versus Allegory:

A **symbol** is a word, place, character, or object that means something beyond what it is on a literal level. Symbolism is the act of using a word, place, character, or object in such a way. For instance, consider the stop sign. It is literally a metal octagon painted red with white streaks. However, everyone on the road will be much safer if we understand that this object also represents the act of coming to a complete stop--an idea hard to encompass briefly without some sort of symbolic substitute. An object, a setting, or even a character in literature can represent another, more general idea. Note, however, that symbols function perfectly well in isolation from other symbols as long as the reader already knows their assigned meaning. Allegory, however, does not work that way; allegory requires symbols working in conjunction with each other.

An **allegory** involves using many interconnected symbols or allegorical figures in such a way that in nearly every element of the narrative has a meaning beyond the literal level, i.e., everything in the narrative is a symbol that relates to other symbols within the story. The allegorical story, poem, or play can be read either literally or as a symbolic statement about a political, spiritual, or psychological truth. The word **allegory** derives from the Greek *allegoria* ("speaking otherwise"): The term loosely describes any story in verse or prose that has a double meaning. This narrative acts as an extended metaphor in which the plot or events reveal a meaning beyond what occurs in the text, creating a moral, spiritual, or even political meaning. The act of interpreting a story as if each object in it had an allegorical meaning is called **allegoresis**.

If we wish to be more exact, an allegory is an act of interpretation--a way of understanding--rather than a *genre* in and of itself. Poems, novels, or plays can all be allegorical. These can be as short as a single sentence or as long as a ten-volume book. The label "allegory" comes from an interaction between symbols that creates a coherent meaning beyond that of the literal level of interpretation. Probably the most famous allegory in English literature is

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), in which the hero Everyman flees the City of Destruction and travels through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Vanity Fair, Doubting Castle, and finally arrives at the Celestial City. The entire narrative represents the average human soul's pilgrimage through temptation and doubt to reach salvation in heaven. Other important allegorical works include mythological allegories like Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche in *The Golden Ass* and Prudentius' *Psychomachia*. More recent, non-mythological allegories include Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Butler's *Erewhon*, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

The following illustrative passage comes from page 22 of J. A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd edition. (Penguin Books, 1991). I have Americanized the British spelling and punctuation:

To distinguish more clearly we can take the old Arab fable of the frog and the scorpion, who met one day on the bank of the River Nile, which they both wanted to cross. The frog offered to ferry the scorpion over on his back provided the scorpion promised not to sting him. The scorpion agreed so long as the frog would promise not to drown him. The mutual promises exchanged, they crossed the river. On the far bank the scorpion stung the frog mortally.

"Why did you do that?" croaked the frog, as it lay dying.

"Why?" replied the scorpion, "We're both Arabs, aren't we?"

If we substitute for a frog a "Mr. Goodwill" or a "Mr. Prudence," and for the scorpion "Mr. Treachery" or "Mr. Two-Face," and make the river any river and substitute for "We're both Arabs" "We're both men . . ." we turn the fable [which illustrates human tendencies by using animals as illustrative examples] into an allegory [a narrative in which each character and action has symbolic meaning]. On the other hand, if we turn the frog into a father and the scorpion into a son (boatman and passenger) and we have the son say "We're both sons of God, aren't we?", then we have a parable (if a rather cynical one) about the wickedness of human nature and the sin of parricide.