Three Types of Allegory, by Prof. J. J. Thompson, adapted by Alfred J. Drake

To any reader new to the pleasures of Medieval or Renaissance texts, the settings, characters and plot incidents may seem bizarre and unmotivated. Or, worse yet, the text may twaddle off into what seems to be useless digression. It may be given to alienating moralism, or to puzzling, half-masked political debates. These varied obstacles often stem from a single source: the rhetorical figure of allegory. As readers, we are very familiar with the tenets of 19th-century realism, or the conventions of Hollywood (which become very odd indeed upon careful scrutiny). But what with realism, surrealism, "postmodernism," and so on, allegory can easily leave us cold and uncomprehending.

To really enjoy older plays and poetry, then, you need to understand the basics of allegory. Here's a formal definition from M. H. Abrams' handy *Glossary of Literary Terms:*

> An allegory is a narrative fiction in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived to make coherent sense on the 'literal,' or primary level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events. (Abrams 4).

By "'literal,' or primary, level of signification," Abrams simply means the most obvious level -- strings of ordered incidents which form a plot. In the first canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy,* for instance, that means wandering lost in a menacing forest, encountering fierce animals, and seeking the sunlight on a distant ridge. What the narrator is doing is obvious; why he's doing it, or what it means (or even what "it" is) is less clear. These events are lent significance by the level of the "second, correlated order." On this level, the poet is spiritually lost, and is tormented by various sins or failures. He longs to ascend to God, but finds his way blocked, and is filled with despair for the condition of his soul. The second level is as coherent and ordered as the first; in fact, it often entirely dictates elements on the first level (landscape, characters, and so on).

To continue with Abrams: "We can distinguish two main types [of allegory]: (1) historical and political allegory, in which the characters and actions ... represent, or 'allegorize' historical personages and events" (Abrams 4). So, for instance, in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene,* Queen Elizabeth and other important political figures appear disguised as characters. Spenser meant this as a compliment to the great queen, of course, but it's not hard to see how the Elizabethan public's ingrained habit of allegorical reading could present a danger to the unwary poet. It's even been suggested that Shakespeare's early long poem *The Rape of Lucrece* is carefully tailored to demonstrate to nobility that it is not allegorical, and that he does not favor establishing a republic (though the original myth does that vigorously).

The second sort of allegory for Abrams is "The allegory of ideas, in which the literal characters represent abstract concepts and the plot exemplifies a doctrine or thesis" (Abrams 4). Abrams mentions Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the passage in Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which Satan sleeps with his daughter Sin and incestuously fathers Death. He goes on to remark that "The central device in ... allegory of ideas ... is the personification of abstract entities such as virtues, vices, states of mind, modes of life, and types of character" (Abrams 4, his emphasis).

To use another example from *The Faerie Queene,* in the "Maske of Cupid," various allegorical figures parade past the heroine, Britomart:

> Repentance feeble, sorrowful and lame:
> Reproach despightfull, careless and unkind;
> Shame most ill-favored, bestiall, and blind:
> Shamed lowrd, Repentance sigh'd, Reproach did scold;
> Reproach sharpe stings, Repentance whips entwined,
> Shame burning brond-yrons in her hand did hold ... (3.12.24).

To Abrams' points, we can add that allegory can be used to portray inner psychological or spiritual states like terror, hatred, sinfulness, purity, and so on. Think back to the beginning of Dante's *The Inferno.* The dreary forest, horrifying beasts, and so on could easily be understood as a way of making the narrator's otherwise-imperceptible spiritual state readable.

Allegory, then, can take at least three forms. As you read, perhaps it's simplest to remember that "surface" elements in a text are often controlled by an overarching set of philosophical, political or psychological ideas -- particularly in morality plays and later forms of the epic. These multiple levels can be examined separately, but they also interact: a character may be named "Good Works," and may act accordingly; at the same time her behavior and utterances will also shape our understanding of "good works" as an abstract principle.