

*DICTIONARY OF
CONCEPTS IN LITERARY
CRITICISM
AND THEORY*

Wendell V. Harris

DICTIONARY OF CONCEPTS IN LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY

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Reference Sources for the Social Sciences and Humanities, Number 12
Raymond G. McInnis, Series Editor



Greenwood Press
New York • Westport, Connecticut • London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harris, Wendell V.

Dictionary of concepts in literary criticism and theory / Wendell V. Harris.

p. cm.—(Reference sources for the social sciences and humanities, ISSN 0730-3335 ; no. 12)

Includes index.

ISBN 0-313-25932-1 (alk. paper)

1. Criticism—Terminology. 2. Literature—Terminology.
3. English language—Terms and phrases. I. Title. II. Series.
PN41.H36 1992
801—dc20 91-20040

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 91-20040

ISBN: 0-313-25932-1

ISSN: 0730-3335

First published in 1992

Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Series Foreword

In all disciplines, scholars seek to understand and explain the subject matter in their areas of specialization. The object of their activity is to produce a body of knowledge about specific fields of inquiry. As they achieve an understanding of their subject, scholars publish the results of their interpretations (that is, their research findings) in the form of explanations.

Explanation, then, can be said to organize and communicate understanding. When reduced to agreed-upon theoretical principles, the explanations that emerge from this process of organizing understanding are called concepts.

Concepts serve many functions. They help us identify topics we think about, help classify these topics into related sets, relate them to specific times and places, and provide us with definitions. Without concepts, someone has said, “man could hardly be said to think.”

Like knowledge itself, the meanings of concepts are fluid. From the moment an authority introduces a concept into a discipline’s vocabulary, where it is given a specific meaning, that concept has the potential to acquire a variety of meanings. As new understandings develop in the discipline, inevitably the meanings of concepts are revised.

Although this pattern in the formation of the meaning of concepts is widely recognized, few dictionaries—certainly none in a consistent manner—trace the path a concept takes as it becomes embedded in a research topic’s literature.

Dictionaries in this series uniformly present brief, substantive discussions of the etymological development and contemporary use of the significant concepts in a discipline or subdiscipline. Another feature that distinguishes these dictionaries from others in the field is their emphasis upon bibliographic information.

Volumes contain about 100 entries. Consistently, entries comprise four parts. In the first part, brief statements give the current meaning of a concept. Next, discursive paragraphs trace a concept’s historical origins and connotative de-

velopment. In part three, sources mentioned in part two are cited, and where appropriate, additional notes briefly highlight other aspects of individual references. Finally, in part four, sources of additional information (that is, extensive reviews, encyclopedia articles, and so forth) are indicated.

Thus, with these volumes, whatever the level of their need, students can explore the range of meanings of a discipline's concepts.

For some, it is the most fundamental need. What is the current meaning of Concept X? Of Concept Y? For others with more intensive needs, entries are departure points for more detailed investigation.

These concept dictionaries, then, fill a long-standing need. They make more accessible the extensive, often scattered literature necessary to knowing a discipline. To have helped in their development and production is very rewarding.

Raymond G. McInnis

Preface

The present volume treats seventy concepts of special importance to literary theory and commentary. In determining what concepts should be included, centrality, contemporary visibility, potential for confusion between different senses of the concept, and practical bearing have been considered. By centrality is meant the importance of the concept to the understanding and definition of other concepts; by visibility, the frequency with which the concept is to be met with in contemporary criticism and theory; by potential for confusion, the likelihood that a reader familiar with only one of several partially conflicting senses would be confused by encountering a different sense; and by practical bearing, the degree to which the concept determines critical practice.

The criteria for selection listed above to some extent define what is meant by concept as opposed to term. While there is obviously no explicit boundary, rhyme royal and peripety are, rather clearly, terms; while comedy, unity, and narratology are, rather clearly, concepts. Many terms are discussed in the context of entries on concepts and are so indexed. Terms and concepts mentioned are not put in quotation marks unless there seems a possibility for confusion about whether the word itself or the term or concept to which it refers is meant; when a term is employed in a specific technical sense by a particular scholar or writer, its first appearance is italicized. Where a concept that is the subject of a separate entry is referred to in a way especially relevant to an understanding of the concept under discussion, its first mention in the entry is printed in small capital letters.

That many of the concepts treated appear to belong more to philosophy (for example, reference) or linguistics (for example, semantics) than to literary theory and commentary is the result of the degree to which approaches to literature have become interdisciplinary. I have attempted to exclude technical questions and issues not directly assimilable to literary theory or commentary; however, the line between relevance and irrelevance is always a matter of perspective.

THE INDEX

Readers are advised to consult the index before concluding that a concept or term has not been treated. Whenever two concepts seem so closely related or have been used so interchangeably that they can be more clearly and less repetitiously discussed under one entry, they have been combined under whichever seemed the most capacious or most likely to be consulted. Thus, "trope" and "figure" come together under "figure," and "semiotics" and "semiology" under "semiotics." On the other hand, where combined consideration of related concepts in the same entry has proved unduly cumbersome, each has been assigned its own entry. Thus, "reader" appears as well as "reader-response theory," and "pragmatic" as well as "pragmatism." As mentioned above, terms defined or commented on in passing also appear in the index.

QUOTATIONS

In consonance with the principle that the way something is said is part of what is said, I have included more quotations from the critical and theoretical works cited than is usual in a dictionary of this kind. Capital letters at the beginning of quoted sentences have been retained even when the quotation is incorporated into another sentence: when one goes to the source to find a passage that has been quoted, it is often of considerable help if the quotation reproduces the original form, including capital letters.

PARENTHETICAL PAGE CITATIONS

Where more than one work by an author appears in the references section of an entry, parenthetical page number citations are accompanied by a brief form of the title. In citations of Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, and Quintilian, the standard marginal numberings of their texts have been given after the volume and page of the edition cited.

OTHER GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Insofar as possible, English translations of works in other languages have been cited, and preference has been given to works available in English.

Since constant *see* references are annoying, it has seemed reasonable to allow some repetition and at times parenthetically to insert brief explanations of matters elsewhere more fully treated.

As the several senses of most of the concepts treated indicate, neutral words for use in definitions and explanations are not always available. For instance, while some senses of text are interchangeable with work, other senses mark a clear distinction. Similarly, for many purposes, though not for all, speaker, author, writer, and utterer are interchangeable; the same is true of hearer, reader,

and audience, and of utterance and text. Where a particular choice among these words is not specifically required, I have used whichever seems most appropriate to the context of discussion; where necessary for clarity, I have used such expressions as hearer or reader and speaker/author. Commentary has been chosen as the comprehensive designation embracing criticism, interpretation, explication, and evaluation, as well as analyses of significance and scholarly investigations of biographical, cultural, and historical relationships.

List of Concepts

Allegory	Literary History
Allusion	Literature
Author	Lyric
Canon	Marxist Literary Criticism
Classic	Meaning
Code	Metaphor
Comedy	Metonymy
Context	Mimesis
Criticism	Modern
Deconstruction	Modernism
Discourse	Myth Criticism
Discourse Analysis	Narrative
Epic	Narratology
Evaluation	New Criticism
Feminist Literary Criticism	Organic Unity
Fiction	Pluralism (literary critical)
Figure	Poetics
Formalism	Postmodernism
Genre	Pragmatics
Genre Theory, Twentieth-Century	Psychological/Psychoanalytic Criticism
Hermeneutics	Reader
Historical Scholarship	Reader-Response Theory
Historicism	Realism
Humanism	Reference
Imagination	Rhetoric
Intention	Romance
Interpretation	Romanticism
Intertextuality	Structuralism
Irony	Style

Satire
Semantics
Semiotics
Sign
Speech-Act Theory
Structuralism
Style

Stylistics
Symbol
Text
Theory
Tragedy
Unity

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THE DICTIONARY

A

ALLEGORY 1. To say one thing and mean another, especially where the implicit meaning is related to the explicit through parallelism or analogy. 2. As distinguished from “Romantic” symbolism defined as an insight into an intrinsic relationship between the signifier and the signified, an external comparison, often a structure of comparisons in narrative form.

There exist various definitions of allegory, but except for those that depend on the contrast between allegory and SYMBOL, these represent not so much different senses of the term as different attempts to define what is central to the concept.

The relationship between allegory and symbolism is complicated because, though one is often partly defined by distinguishing it from the other, both have several senses. Symbol in its largest sense evidently includes allegory; but allegory in sense 1 equally includes the concept of symbol. George Puttenham reflects the older comprehensiveness of the term allegory in The Arte of English Poesie (1589): “The use of this figure is so large, and his virtue of so great efficacy as it is supposed no man can pleasantly utter and persuade without it. . . . Of this figure . . . we will speak first as of the chief ringleader and captain of all other figures either in Poetical or oratory science” (186).

1. Allegory as a Greek term is generally translated as “other speaking,” an essentially rhetorical designation. However, as Philip Rollinson points out, allegory came to be associated with *hyponoai*, the finding of hidden or underlying meanings. The origin of the practice of finding allegorical meanings beyond the literal meanings in Homer and in Greek myth is generally attributed to the Theagenes of the sixth century B.C. It was well established by the time of Plato, who rejected teaching children such tales as “the narrative of Hephaestus binding Here his mother, or how on another occasion Zeus sent him flying for taking her part when she was being beaten,” adding, “whether they are supposed to

have an allegorical meaning or not" (2:201; 378d). The perfecting of modes of allegorizing Homer is attributed to the Stoics of the fourth and third centuries B.C. (see Pfeiffer, 10, 35, 238). The practice was then transferred to the interpretation of the Old Testament, perhaps first by Philo (first centuries B.C. and A.D.). Allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament was initiated in the New Testament itself; Christianizing allegory was applied to Greek and Roman myths throughout the medieval period. The connection between allegory, myth, and religious belief is a strong one.

The complexity of the concept of allegory can be understood only if a number of basic distinctions are kept in mind.

1a. If allegory is regarded simply as an expressive figure, the author and the interpreter who understands the allegorical meaning are participating in the same activity from different directions. The definition of Trypho (first century B.C.) is fully rhetorical: "*Allegoria* is speech which makes precisely clear some one thing but which presents the conception of another according to likeness to the greatest extent" (cited in Rollinson, 112). Longinus explicitly regards allegory as a means of pleasing and gaining attention. "[A]llegoria adorns speech by changing expression and signifying the same thing through a fresher expression of a different kind. For that which is commonplace, threadbare and endlessly repeated leads to satiety" (Rollinson, 111).

However, if the allegorical meaning is discovered or imposed by the interpreter, allegory becomes quite another thing, with the type depending on whether the interpreter and/or the reader of the interpreter's reading regards the allegorical meaning as discovered or imposed. The clearest example of this mode of what may be called allegorizing, as opposed to interpreting language that is presumably intended to be understood allegorically, occurs in what is known as *typological* interpretation of the Old Testament. Christian exegetes saw events of the Old Testament as types—allegorical representations—of events or teachings in the New Testament. The earliest typological allegorizations are to be found in the New Testament itself (see, for instance, Corinthians 10:1–11 and Galatians 4:22–29).

There is a complication here. The Christian writers do not appear to deny the historicity of the events recorded in the Old Testament, even though they find in them meanings of which those who actually wrote the words of the Old Testament were not aware. Nevertheless, God, who ultimately "authored" the events, is, of course, understood to have intended their meaning in intending the total history of the world. When Christians turned to the allegorizing of pagan myths, they were also finding meanings that the authors of the Greek and Latin works from which these were taken had not intended and that could not be referred to a higher power (although the formulation of these myths could be seen as distant or imperfect graspings of truths revealed only later). However, as Philip Rollinson (following James Coulter) comments, all allegorizing—that is, all discovery of allegorical meanings not recognized by the authors of the writings in which they are found—requires the imposition of the doctrines of

the discoverers. Allegorizers “must first of all represent their own preconceived notions of what constitutes ‘certain irrefutable truth about the nature of reality, whether physical, psychological, divine or metaphysical’ ” (x). Whether an interpretation is an allegorization depends on one’s judgment of the intention of the author; whether a particular allegorization is judged legitimate depends on one’s system of beliefs.

Two special points should be noted. First, for all the difference between the planned composition of an allegory and the allegorizing interpretation of a text that may not have been so composed, the writers of medieval and later allegory were heavily influenced by the tradition of allegorical exegesis. Second, whether practiced as creation or interpretation, allegory is a mode that can occur in a variety of genres, and not a genre in itself.

1b. A distinction made by the Venerable Bede is closely linked to that above in that it relates only to biblical interpretation. Bede differentiates verbal and factual allegory. Factual allegory, found in biblical events that, while accepted as historically true, are intended by God to be understood allegorically, is the same thing as typological interpretation. Verbal allegory in the Bible is found in the use of figures for the conveyance of divine truth—they are rhetorical figures rather than narratives of historical events, but the truth behind them is beyond doubt (the parables of Jesus are examples). Samuel Mather, whose *Figures or Types of the Old Testament* is central to American theological thought on biblical interpretation, draws the same distinction in other terms, differentiating types from allegories. “[T]here is an Historical Verity in all those typical Histories of the Old Testament. They are not bare Allegories, or parabolical Poems, such as the Song of Solomon, or Jotham’s Parable . . . but they are a true Narration of Things really existent and acted in the World, and are literally and historically to be understood” (128).

1c. From the tradition of allegorical exegesis of the Bible comes the well-known differentiation of four levels: the literal; the allegorical (not to be confused with “allegorical” in the larger sense that includes this one), which illumines human life under the pattern of Christ’s life; the tropological, which provides moral lessons; and the anagogical, which points toward divinely inspired truth. The fourfold categorization is attributed to John Cassian (A.D. 360–435), but is best known from Dante’s letter to Can Grande. Dante writes:

And for the better illustration of this method of exposition, we may apply it to the following verses: “When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion.” For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption from Christ is signified; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may one and all in a general sense be termed allegorical, inasmuch as they are different (*diversi*) from the literal or historical. (199)

1d. There is a difference between, in Rollinson's words, "allegory which has essentially two meanings, a satisfactory literal sense and some additional other meaning" and "allegory conceived as involving only one level of hidden meaning, which is to be inferred from the obscure and literally impossible text" (xx). A morally unacceptable myth, for example, is understood by an allegorical interpreter to be of the second kind.

1e. A distinction must also be drawn between figural and narrative allegory. As John MacQueen phrases it, "The myth of Orpheus is narrative allegory, but in an isolated reference, the harp of Orpheus might be used as figural allegory" (18). To take perhaps a clearer example, the personification of Time in the absence of any supporting myth or narrative is an example of figurative allegory.

1f. A threefold division that partly cuts across all the above is that between, to use James Wimsatt's terms, *topical*, *scriptural*, and *personification*. A fiction representing "the real actions of historical people" is a topical allegory. Scriptural allegories are those "written in imitation of the allegory found by medieval exegetes through the Bible" (23). Biblical parables, Kafkaesque fiction, and works like Orwell's *1984* share this classification. The last (and most common) category is comprised of allegories that simply personify abstract qualities. The first fully developed example of personification is Prudentius's *Psychomachia*.

The variety of ways of looking at allegory reflected in the above distinctions makes evident why those who set out to define allegory are so often driven back to the general form: saying one thing and meaning another. Personification is found in so many allegories that it is often taken as the defining quality. Thus Elder Olson sums up the allegorist *tout court* as "someone who uses personification and makes such abstract things as the virtues and vices into people" (593). However, while Mr. Worldly Wise is a personification, the Slough of Despond is a metaphor, and it is forcing the word to see the Absalom of Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* as a "personification" of the Duke of Monmouth.

Allegory is sometimes defined as an extended metaphor or a sequence of linked metaphors. For Puttenham, allegory is metaphor "extending to whole and large speeches" and thus becoming "a long and perpetual metaphor" (187). Albert Guérard defines allegory as "simile (comparison) developed into a narrative. . . . Merely a prolonged figure of speech; [it] does not imply *real* connection between the two terms of the comparison" (487). That would seem to make what has been called a figural allegory the same thing as a metaphor. However, though to describe Opportunity as a figure with a graspable forelock while bald behind seems as much metaphor as allegorical personification, to image Time as an invisible but irresistible, methodical but not wholly predictable destroyer seems more nearly an exercise in allegory. Moreover, the whole of a narrative allegory is hardly a single metaphor or even a consistently linked set of metaphors. As Jon Whitman notes, the closer the correspondences between signifier and signified, the less allegorical a narrative seems; but the more divergence, the less tenable it is (2).

2. Allegory and symbolism are used interchangeably through most of the