

Meaning

Allusion

This question always gets some of my favorite wrong answers on quizzes or tests. In answer to the question "Define allusion," some desperate student will invariably answer, "Something you see that isn't really there." That's kind of like the grade they hope to get--points for trying, but not really. While that definition is the right answer for "illusion," a literary *allusion* is something different. Before I define it for you, consider the following ideas.

How many of you have friends who have known you forever? What key words or phrases set you off into laughter or tears--so much so that you can't get your breath to explain them to someone who is new to the group? And when you do explain, they may or may not get the same emotion you do? How do those words add depth or meaning to an experience or a discussion or an event? Those words or phrases are "allusions" that only have a reference point in your particular group. They bring to mind a story, an event, or a person. That's the generic definition of allusion. The formal, literary definition of allusion is a little more complex: an allusion is a reference to past or present person, event, place--something that everyone should know. This reference, whether it is one or two words or even a whole sentence, can often add meaning and depth to a poem, giving that depth without necessarily explaining the whole thing. Sometimes, though, just like new friends don't understand allusions, poetry detectives don't always understand allusions that come from places they're not familiar with. Looking them up is often a good idea.

Some of the most common allusions come from the Bible. Even a phrase such as "the patience of Job" is an allusion that should bring to mind all the suffering of Job and his patience in that suffering. Notice how, once Job is mentioned, we understand the story of Job and we can get meaning and even emotion without long explanations about Job. Another biblical allusion would be someone saying on the third rainy day in a row, "I'm beginning to feel like Noah." Do you know that allusion? What depth and meaning do those references add to a poem?

For instance, in the poem "When I Consider How My Light is Spent" by Milton (lesson on form) there is an allusion to "that one talent which is death to hide." The story he is referring to is a biblical parable. With those eight words, he gives a background for his emotions and the reasons for his questions. If we're acquainted with the Bible, the parable comes to mind, and we know the whole story--and that story informs the rest of the poem and our reaction to the speaker.

Another source of allusions that should be common knowledge are myths and fables. They serve as references that inform a poem or even sometimes inform our hopes and dreams. Have you ever wondered why the first space missions were named Gemini and Mercury and Apollo? Who are these people and why are they important? Looking them up in a dictionary or encyclopedia will help you. It isn't always just Greek and Roman mythology that provide a source for allusions. Other cultures and religions also have mythologies and fables that often inform our lives. Artwork, plays, people, and famous sayings can also provide sources for allusions.

Sometimes, if something rings a bell, but it's not really clear, looking up the words in a good dictionary will give you something to go on. Another good place to go is an encyclopedia. Sometimes, knowing the story can make a poem more clear as it adds highlights and shadows and changes the way we look at a poem. The next objective will give you a chance to practice identifying allusions from various cultures.

It's easy to blow off references we don't understand and pass them by. It's easy to say the poet did a bad job and wasn't being clear. If we do that, however, we often miss additional meaning and purpose to the poetry. Sometimes, if the allusion is central to the poem, we may miss the point of the whole poem entirely--or we may lose a laugh along the way. (I'm a Harry Potter fan, and I have to confess the three-headed dog in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone made me laugh out loud, especially when Hagrid bought "Fluffy" off a "Greek chappie." If you don't know why this is funny, you're missing an allusion--and a point in the story.) Here are three poems in which an allusion is central to the meaning and understanding of the poem. See if you can find the allusion first, then see if you know the story. If you don't know the allusion and the background to the allusion, make sure you look it up. How does knowing the allusion change how you view the poem?

We'll start with a poem in which the allusion is based in Christian mythology, "The Oxen" by Thomas Hardy. What Christian myth or fable is the focus of his poem? Once you discover the fable, why is the fable important? Does the poem reinforce the fable, i.e. explain or confirm it somehow? If it does not, what is the poem doing? How many time periods are in the poem? Who are we listening to? What does the speaker want? What did the speaker find or lose?

The Oxen

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel,

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

--Thomas Hardy

Sometimes poems can contain allusions to several things at once. In "Musée Des Beaux Arts" by W. H. Auden, a double allusion is present. Who is Breughel? That's a name mentioned that should help in your start for the reference to the allusion. The speaker also mentions Icarus. What is the story of Icarus? How do Breughel and Icarus connect? If they do, in what way do they connect? How does the double allusion give you a visual reference?

Musée Des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

--W.H. Auden

How does the connection between Breughel and Icarus help you understand the poem? What does the visual do for your understanding? Does the visual enhance the verbal or vice versa? How do the poems help us understand the concept of failure--even of tragedy? Why don't the passersby look at or seem to care about Icarus? What does Auden say about that? How does his view correspond with our lives? Which part do we play?

"Siren Song"

The third poem is the real test, "Siren Song" by Margaret Atwood. This poem doesn't make any sense until you understand the allusion. There are several layers to this allusion. In other words,

it's not enough to know who the Sirens are, but you need to know the myths and incidents that surround them. Otherwise, some of the allusions aren't as strong as they could be and so they can't provide for you the highlights and shadows that make me laugh every time I read this poem. Greek mythology can come in really handy. So do you have the myth? How does the knowledge of the myth strengthen the poem? How does the knowledge of the myth make the poem? Why is the poem much more interesting with the knowledge of the myth?

Siren Song

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who had heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.
Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?
I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical
with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.

--Margaret Atwood

Notice how knowing what the allusions are strengthens the highlights and shadows in a poem. The allusions can strengthen meaning, carry ideas, and sometimes extend meanings, all with a simple word or phrase. Just as conversations with old friends sometimes don't mean anything to our new friends, poems with unfamiliar allusions may not mean anything until we understand the allusion. Becoming familiar with the allusions and looking up some of the things we don't understand can make a good poem great by adding highlights and shadows we may be too color blind to see. Another way poets add to and extend the meaning of a poem is with symbol, which we will discuss next.

Symbol

In order to explain symbol, let me take a quick poll. Here's the question: Can you be engaged without a ring? All those who believe the statement is true, hold up your right hand (I can see you). All of those who believe the question is false, hold up your left hand (Yes, I can see you, too). It's tied, fifty-fifty. I have to confess here that I've never really understood the idea that so many students have of "I'm not really engaged until I get the ring." The ring isn't the engagement, but the commitment that you've made to marry is the engagement. However, we often confuse one idea with the other. How does this poll connect to the idea of symbol? A *symbol* is something concrete that stands for something abstract. That said, sometimes people refuse to look beyond the symbol to the meaning behind it. For instance, an engagement ring is a symbol of a commitment, not the actual commitment itself. The ring is the concrete symbol of the engagement; it represents the commitment and feelings that create an engagement.

Another symbol that contains meaning is the United States flag. It is the symbol of freedom, of liberty, of the opportunity to choose. While a literal flag is simply cloth colored red, white, and blue, its symbolic implications go beyond that piece of cloth into what our country means to us. Even the colors on the flag (and other colors as well) have come to carry symbolic meanings: we associate white with peace or surrender, blue with patriotism and loyalty, red with courage. Our feeling about our flag as a symbol and what that symbol has come mean are why flag burning is such an issue.

Symbols matter in our daily living. We live by symbols. Some symbols are common to cultures--things like hearts and red roses for love, a dove as a symbol of peace--while others are only relevant for a single poem or story. One of the best reasons for studying literary symbol is that symbols literally control our lives. They encourage us to think certain ways about certain things, and because we think about the world in those symbols, our actions and behavior often reflect the symbols we think in.

For instance, since we just read so many love poems, let's use the symbol of the broken heart. We've all seen the pendants with half a heart--and somewhere there's the matching half of the heart. We talk about finding "our other half." Even the sappy line from *Jerry Maguire*, "You complete me," reinforces this idea of incompleteness. We've even got a symbol and a language that reinforces the symbol. But think about it--do we really want something broken when we look for a spouse? Do we assume we are only half people? Are those scary thoughts? What I'm asking you to do is to look at the symbol of the broken heart and how it governs our lives and our

thought processes and our language. Studying literature and literary symbol allows us to ask: What symbols are controlling this poem? And, by extension, do we want those symbols controlling our lives?

As a pattern for studying the symbol in a poem, let's take a close look at a symbol in a poem: What is the central symbol of William Blake's "The Tyger."

The Tyger

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare sieze the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

--William Blake

Ask yourselves these questions about the symbol and its meaning to you. How do you respond to Blake's tyger?

1. Do you feel fear? Respect?
2. How do you see that "fearful symmetry"? Is the tyger beautiful as well as terrifying?

3. Does your reaction include admiration of the tyger's beauty? Terror at its power? Amazement at a creator who can have pulled this incredible creation off?
4. How does Blake convey his amazement? Asking fourteen astonished questions in twenty-four lines? And all of the questions unanswerable? What are the traditional symbolic implications of "tiger"?
5. Fierceness? Cunning power? Predatory force? Does Blake use those in his poem? What is Blake's Tyger?
6. What is being symbolized here with tigerishness? The wrath of God? Evil? The bad stuff that naturally comes out of life? Energy? Power?
7. Will the true and living tyger stand up? Which of these is the real tyger?
8. Is the creator reflected in His creation? How does Blake picture the creator? Fiercely hard worker? A smith, like the Roman god Vulcan? Fire god? One who "frames" and "twists" and uses hammers, chains, and anvils? Not a wizard with a wand, but a laborer? A God not afraid to get His hands dirty?
9. "In what furnace was thy brain?": How is God a "furnace"? Is Blake wondering what kind of white-hot creative heat it takes to create a tyger, a beast of prey? In light of how much it takes him to create a poem? What do you have to know to make a tyger? Is the tyger the total of the creation or merely a part?
10. Is Blake, in admiring the creator of this wonder, wondering how much of himself is in his work? Why is everything burning in this poem?
11. Fires of hell? Creative energy?
12. Why in that first line is the tyger "burning bright"? Why all those burnings in lines 6, 8, 14? And why is everything not burning dark? What is the pattern of the allusions in the poem? What's the allusion in line 7? Line 8? Is there an allusion in stanza 5?
13. What's the impact of the allusions to Icarus and Prometheus? To Lucifer? Why are those allusions helpful? Enlightening? How negative are these images? How do these contribute to the symbolic impact of the tyger?
14. This poem has been called a parable: What's its moral? What life-shaking questions does the poem raise?
15. Is the Creator implicit in creation--does nature, with all its viciousness, reflect God? "Did he smile his work to see"? Does God feel good about His creation, even with all those predators and parasites?
16. What is God's relationship to evil?
17. Is God in charge, or is God controlled by the universe? Does your theology tend to say so?
18. Is God more concerned with aesthetics than morals? Should we be?
19. Does the creation of Frankenstein's monster like the Tyger transcend morals?
20. What about that line 20 "lamb"? Did "he who made the lamb make thee"? Do we have tyger as well as lamb in us? Does it further your insight to know that Blake wrote a poem called "The Lamb" that can be seen as a companion to this poem?
21. Does the form of the poem contribute anything to its meaning?
22. Do you find any "fearful symmetry" here? Why are the first and final stanzas almost identical?
23. What does the shift from "could" to "dare" suggest? Creator not only capable, but brave enough?

24. So has there been a shift in perspective through the poem? Any significance to the order of the questions?
25. Why are the questions on the outside longer, those inside shorter?
26. So what do those observations add up to? What are the symbolic implications of Blake's tyger?
27. Are these merely theoretical for you? Do any of them become personal? Do the implications of the symbol show up in your language, your thought processes? Is Blake asking questions you may have wanted to ask? Been afraid to ask?

Now study the symbols in "The Lightning is a Yellow Fork" by Emily Dickinson and "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" by Emily Dickinson. Ask yourself some of these same kinds of questions. What kind of depth and meaning do the symbols add to the poem?

The Lightning is a Yellow Fork

The Lightning is a yellow Fork
From Tables in the sky
By inadvertent fingers dropt
The awful Cutlery

Of mansions never quite disclosed
And never quite concealed
The Apparatus of the Dark
To ignorance revealed.
--Emily Dickinson

I Heard a Fly Buzz

I heard a Fly buzz -- when I died --
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air --
Between the Heaves of Storm --

The Eyes around -- had wrung them dry --
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset -- when the King
Be witnessed -- in the Room --

I willed my Keepsakes -- Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable -- and then it was
There interposed a Fly --

With Blue -- uncertain stumbling Buzz --
Between the light -- and me --

And then the Windows failed -- and then
I could not see to see --
--Emily Dickinson

Personal Experience

When we looked at symbols in "The Tyger" and "The Lightning is a Yellow Fork" and "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died," we naturally thought about how those symbols highlighted or shadowed the meaning and themes of their particular poems. My religious disposition makes many of those highlights and shadows religious: Does the awesome tyger reflect its creator--is nature a reflection of God? Is God dropping that lightning fork, or is someone more fearful up there? Is "the King" Jesus or death?

Most of us can't just read a poem and enjoy it. We want to know what it means, what it's about. Is "The Tyger" an exploration of creativity in the universe, with its thrills and its dangers? Is it a poem asking about the terrible power to create and destroy that is part of Godhood? Is "The Lightning is a Yellow Fork" wondering who is up there dropping things on us? Is it a poem wondering what visions we could see with the additional clarity that lightning might bring? Is "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I died" exploring the experience of death? Or is it a poem about how something momentous can be overlooked in our tendency to focus on the mundane?

"I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" is a wonderful example of the way poems lure us toward theme. We couldn't get a homelier topic--the minor annoyance of a fly buzzing. Yet that mundane experience invites us into profound territory--to the very verge of death. Poems tend to entice us through the familiar toward the profound and invite us to examine the things that matter most in life--things like love and death and our relationship with God.

Sometimes, symbol governs a poem to such an extent as to create an *allegory*. In an allegory, characters, events, or settings are used to represent certain abstract ideas, qualities, or concepts usually moral, religious, or political in nature. Symbols still work to bring us to theme, but in an allegory, there's usually something going on that is much deeper--and the theme is more complex than merely reading the symbol. Let's look at a couple of poems in which allegory and symbol play great parts. Since we've had enough of death, we'll use the topic of life--big topic and opposite from death.

Compare "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost with "Uphill" by Christina Rossetti. My guess is that you've heard "The Road Not Taken" a lot. Think back to those occasions when you've heard it--what were the themes or topics of those conversations or meetings or talks? Now look at the poem again. What are the concrete symbols that govern those abstract ideas? How do those symbols compare with the symbols in "Uphill"? Are both of them using them same symbols to mean different things? Different symbols to mean the same things? Or a combination of one or the other.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

--Robert Frost

Uphill

Does the road wind uphill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?
A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my face?
You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
Those who have gone before.
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
They will not keep you waiting at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
Yea, beds for all who come.

--Christina Georgina Rossetti

Read the poems for theme, asking yourself: What is this about? Does that matter to me? Be careful of assigning emotions or "typical" meanings. Look carefully at the poems. Perhaps one of my favorite "ah-hah" moments came when a student said, in a voice of awe and wonder, "There's nothing in 'The Road Not Taken' that says this is a good choice." Is that true? What positive words do you see in relation to the choice? What negative words do you see in relation to the choice? Is there anything that says this is a bad choice? Or is it, after all, just a choice? And the idea that choices make all the difference in a life? How does that view of the theme and symbol change your reading of the poem? Which is the most accurate reading of the poem? Why?

And what about "Uphill"? Is the poem comforting? True? What kind of end does it promise? One you look forward to? One you dread? What are the two possible meanings symbolized by the inn? What religious implications do we want the inn to have? What does it have to say about choice and life? Do either of the poems reflect experiences you've been through? Do the poems taken together illuminate your personal experience? How does the use of symbols and allusions highlight and shadow a poem to create meaning--sometimes very personal meaning--especially as we take those symbols and allusions and make them relevant to our lives?

In many ways, and in many poems, this lesson has asked you to look at what you believe about what it means to be human, and in some ways a believer, in a fallen world. Which poem most accurately reflects you and your thoughts?