

THE INTERPRETATION OF SYMBOL AND ALLEGORY—DANTE'S FOURFOLD METHOD

Students often have difficulty interpreting symbol and allegory; a helpful way to think about the interpretation of allegories was invented by Dante Alighieri, explained in his “Epistle to Can Grande.” Dante basically says that allegories may be interpreted on four levels: The *literal* or *historical* level: the things that are actually happening in the story on a surface level. For example, in Sophocles *Antigone*, Antigone chooses to bury her brother despite her uncle’s direct orders to the contrary, thus risking execution.

- The *political* level: the level on which human beings relate to others in a community and in the world. In *Antigone*, this level of interpretation shows the reader that Antigone’s defiance threatens King Creon’s political power and the stability of the *polis*. The rule of law is shaken and the city’s order is threatened. The question is this: Which is more important, the state’s stability or the individual’s conscience?
- The *moral* or *psychological* level: the way in which the self relates to the realm of ethics. In Sophocles’ play, Antigone must bury her brother because not doing so would be both a moral crime against the family and an inhuman denial of the brotherhood of man. It is right to show respect for the dead; in this, the law of the gods must prevail.
- The *spiritual* level: the universal level on which a person relates to the cosmos, the way of the pilgrim soul. On this level, Antigone represents any free spirit bound to rebel against the repression of absolute authority. She symbolizes free will and the power of the individual. She shows the reader the idealism of youth that inflexibility seeks martyrdom rather than compromise.

The **Fourfold Method** lends itself to the analysis of drama, fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Many different types of texts may be allegorical; this technique allows students to go as far up the ladder of interpretation as they would like while grounding their interpretation in the text itself. Each level is valid; each can stand alone. Some works contain only two of the levels; others may exist on all four planes.