

- ❑ Describe the following personified characters. What do they do, or what are their roles in the story of *Piers Plowman*?
 - ❑ *Holy Church*: Described as a great lady, “lovely of look, in linen clothes” (line 3, Passus 1, 336) who explains the Field of Folk to the dreamer and tells him about Truth. Her role is that of teacher.
 - ❑ *Truth*: A character whom we do not meet, but who represents God in the earlier parts of the poem. Also later personified in Passus 18 as the character Truth, this time not connected with God but simply standing for the abstract concept of truth—that is, conformance with reality. Truth is one of the four sisters who meet to discuss Christ’s death and triumph in Hell.
 - ❑ *Kind Wit*: The personification of common sense, who wants people to work “either in teaching or tallying or toiling with his hands” (line 248, page 348). This character is little described.
 - ❑ *Hunger*: The personification of the human desire for food. Hunger’s role in this poem is to make Waster (and others who will not labor) work for their food. He is also a teacher in that he explains to Piers how to keep the people working.
 - ❑ *Mercy*: Described as one of four sisters who meet to discuss Christ’s descent into Hell and His glorious triumph. She is “meek,” “most gracious,” and “goodly of speech” (lines 115-116, Passus 18, 360). Mercy and Peace believe that God and man have been reconciled by Christ’s death.
 - ❑ *Righteousness*: Another of the four sisters. She and Truth are reluctant to believe that mankind has really been reconciled with God, but after witnessing Christ’s triumph, she agrees that it must be so.
 - ❑ *Peace*: The last of the four sisters, described as “sportive” (playful) and richly dressed in garments of Patience (lines 168-169, Passus 18, 361). Her lover is Love, and she triumphantly tells her sisters that peace has come between God and man, through Christ.
 - ❑ *Book*: Described as having “two broad eyes,” which may refer to the Old and New Testaments (footnote 2, page 362). The Book is the Bible, and as a personified character he bears witness to Christ’s birth and death, and prophesies the triumph over Hell.

2. Discuss allegory and *Piers Plowman* as an allegory.

- ❑ What is an allegory?

Allegory is a literary work in which the author embodies abstract or spiritual realities in a concrete and physical story, in such a way that there is a clear correspondence between the abstract or spiritual and the concrete or physical.
- ❑ What are the two essential characteristics of allegory?
 - ❑ *The literal story*
 - ❑ *The real but abstract situation (often psychological or spiritual) that the literal story dramatizes and makes understandable*
 - ❑ In allegory, these two elements remain distinct, though they are related. Like a camera that slowly zooms into focus, an allegorist takes a hazy and abstract situation, such as emotions and thoughts about God, and focuses this reality by embodying it in a story with characters and a plot that depict what is going on in a person’s mind and soul.
 - ❑ Without directly mentioning the abstract situation, the author can thus create fantastic, magical, or imaginative stories that arise from a reality that is part of our everyday lives.
- ❑ What two things must the reader do when seeking to understand, interpret, and enjoy allegory?
 - ❑ *First, enjoy the literal story!*
 - ❑ *Second, look at the same time for correspondences between the literal story and the abstract reality.*
 - ❑ Dorothy Sayers warns readers that it is important not to read allegory only for the literal story—most of the fun comes from seeing how the story relates to and sheds light on the situation behind it!
 - ❑ When reading and interpreting allegory, it is also helpful to remember that the life of the mind, particularly the battle we experience between virtue and vice, is what C.S. Lewis calls the “germ of all the allegorical poetry” (*Allegory of Love* 54).
- ❑ How is the structure of an allegory different from that of a parable or fable?

While parables and fables are generally short and have one obvious “moral,” allegories often include many episodes, all unified under an overarching theme, usually of a battle, quest, or journey.

- TEACHER'S NOTES
- ❑ What is the purpose of allegory?
 - ❑ *An allegory may teach one or several lessons. But beyond teaching what we ought to do, an allegorist seeks to dramatize a state of mind.*
 - ❑ This *psychomachia*, literally a “battle of the soul,” is not always visible in the literal story of the allegory—in fact, the best allegories are often journey stories, as in Dante’s *Commedia*—but when reading such allegories we are constantly reminded of the reality that our will is divided against itself.
 - ❑ In allegory, the mind becomes the stadium in which we sit down to watch our various emotions and thoughts face each other (Lewis 61). Like opponents in a football game, Love confronts Hate, Passion competes against Reason, and so forth.
 - ❑ While allegory certainly has limitations, its power to reveal and explore our mind and heart gives it exceptional strength and value as a form.
 - ❑ What is the difference between allegory and symbol?

After hearing your student’s thoughts, you may wish to make the following points:

 - ❑ In *The Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis makes a helpful distinction between allegory and symbols:
 - ❑ Allegory takes abstract ideas (virtues, Love, etc.) or immaterial people (such as God, who is spirit) and turns them into a concrete, material story.
 - ❑ A symbol¹ works in the opposite direction, using a concrete object (almost never a person) as a sign for a deeper reality (45).
 - ❑ Allegory might be thought of as a sharpening or crystallizing of thoughts, emotions, and actions, often into personified characters. Symbolism, by contrast, begins with an object and broadens it to suggest a deeper reality with a rich variety of meanings.
 - ❑ For example, Jesus makes the prodigal son and father into pictures of a repentant sinner and God. As people, they are unlikely to be symbols (a symbol would be something like Jesus’ use of the pearl as an emblem of the Kingdom of Heaven), but they are definitely not personified characters.
 - ❑ If Jesus had made the story of the prodigal son a personification allegory, he might have told how Prodigal left his father Grace in search of Luxury, Deceitful Riches, and Vice, only to be robbed by them and thrown into a dark prison with Hunger and Anguish as his jailers. After Prodigal escapes from jail with the golden key miraculously brought by Repentance, he returns to his father Grace, who lavishes on him rich robes woven by Forgiveness and who gives him Love as a teacher and constant companion.
 - ❑ Are allegorical characters typically complex and multi-dimensional, or simple and one-dimensional? Does allegory tend to include personifications as characters?
 - ❑ *Unlike real people who have a full range of human emotions, virtues, and faults, characters in allegories are usually simple and generally have only one defining characteristic. Most allegorical characters are personifications.*
 - ❑ Allegorical characters usually *are* a characteristic. For example, Truth, Hunger, and Peace are all abstract ideas personified in *Piers Plowman* as characters, and each character looks, speaks, and acts in a way that is consistent with his or her name.
 - ❑ Having personified abstractions as characters is one more quality that sets allegory apart from a parable or fable. As a rule, parables (and fables, distinct because of their typical animal characters) work through examples and symbols rather than personified characters.
 - ❑ Is *Piers Plowman* an allegory? (Student Question #2)
 - ❑ *Piers Plowman is an allegory because it uses a concrete story (including physical conflict between characters who are personifications of abstract or spiritual ideas) to clearly correspond and represent spiritual reality.*
 - ❑ *Piers Plowman* is an unusually complex example of allegory because in it several of the personified characters are used in more than one way.
 - ❑ For example, Piers himself is a simple country plowman, but he is also identified with pastors, with Peter the Apostle, and (in Passus 18) with Christ and with mankind in general.
 - ❑ In fact, Langland’s personified characters have such a burden of meaning riding on their shoulders that they sometimes seek to function as both personifications and symbols, two things that are usually mutually exclusive. People are very seldom symbols in stories, but characters like Piers could almost be described as symbolic, since they stand for two or three ideas besides themselves.

¹ Symbol: Any detail in a work of literature that, in addition to its literal meaning, stands for something else (Ryken 517).