Literary Focus

**Parable**

A **parable** is a brief narrative that teaches a moral, a lesson about life. Parables rely on the use of **allegory**—a story in which the characters, settings, and events stand for, or symbolize, abstract or moral concepts. Allegories can be read on one level for their literal meaning and on another for their symbolic meaning. Since symbols can suggest numerous meanings, even a brief, seemingly simple parable can be interpreted in several ways. *Parable* comes from a Greek word meaning “comparison,” indicating that the surface details in these brief stories can be compared to underlying abstract concepts.

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| A **parable** is a brief allegorical story that teaches a moral lesson about life.  *For more on Parable, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.* |

Reading Skills

**Making Inferences About Theme**

The **theme** is the central insight about life in a story. The theme of a parable does not need to be directly stated; it can usually be **inferred,** or guessed, from the text itself. You should be able to state the theme in the form of a sentence that makes a generalization about the human experience: *Forgiving* *your enemies is necessary for your own peace* *of mind.*

Background

About forty parables—all of which are attributed to Jesus—appear throughout the four Gospels of the New Testament. The biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias says of Jesus’ down-to-earth figurative language that “the parables’ imagery is drawn from the daily life of Palestine.... The hearers find themselves in a familiar scene where everything is so clear and simple that a child can understand it, and so obvious that again and again those who hear cannot help saying ‘Yes, that’s how it is.’”

The parables involve everyday subjects: a shepherd who searches for a sheep that has gone astray; a traveler who helps a man who has been robbed and beaten; a poor woman who loses a coin. But beneath the easily grasped action and everyday imagery of the parables are important messages about moral conduct.

From “The Problem” from *Rediscovering the Parables* by Joachim Jeremias. Published by Scribner’s, New York,1966.

*The word* prodigal *usually means “recklessly* *extravagant” or “wasteful,” but it can also imply* *great generosity.*

The Prodigal Son

New English Bible

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| Again he1 said:  “There was once a man who had two sons; and the younger said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the property.’ So he divided his estate between them.2 A few days later the younger son turned the whole of his share into cash and left home for a distant country, where he squandered it in reckless living. He had spent it all, when a severe famine fell upon that country and he began to feel the pinch. So he went and attached himself to one of the local landowners, who sent him on to his farm to mind the pigs.3 He would have been glad to fill his belly with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. Then he came to his senses and said, ‘How many of my father’s paid servants have more food than they can eat, and here am I, starving to death! I will set off and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned, against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants.”’ So he set out for his father’s house. But while he was still a long way off his father saw him, and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, flung his arms round him, and kissed him. The son said, ‘Father, I have sinned, against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! fetch a robe, my best one, and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us have a feast to celebrate the day. For this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.’ And the festivities began. |

“Now the elder son was out on the farm; and on his way back, as he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what it meant. The servant told him, ‘Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and pleaded with him; but he retorted, ‘You know how I have slaved for you all these years; I never once disobeyed your orders; and you never gave me so much as a kid, for a feast with my friends. But now that this son of yours turns up, after running through your money with his women, you kill the fatted calf for him.’ ‘My boy,’ said the father, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. How could we help celebrating this happy day? Your brother here was dead and has come back to life, was lost and is found.’”

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| Luke 15:12–30 |

About Zen Parables

Zen is difficult to describe. It is a sect of Buddhism, but it is less a religion than a form of Buddhist meditative practice. It has no holy book, no ornate church or temple, no complicated ritual. Zen monks do not preach sermons about right and wrong behavior. Zen focuses on the inner self, rather than on the outer self that acts in the world. Yet for eight hundred years, Zen has strongly appealed to Japanese warriors as well as to monks, politicians, and artists. Today, it is also practiced by people in the East and the West from all walks of life and different religions who wish to find inner peace, relieve stress, and focus on essential priorities.

The Philosophy of Zen

The object of Zen is to free the mind from everyday, conventional logic through meditation. Followers of Zen believe that meditation empties the mind and suppresses the ego, leading to a clearer understanding of one’s own nature. According to one legend, Bodhidharma, a famous Zen monk, gazed at a blank wall for nine years before achieving inner enlightenment.

Monks and Warriors

Originating in India and spreading to China, Zen Buddhism was introduced to Japan in 1191. Zen monasteries were soon founded in Kamakura and Kyoto. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the samurai, feudal warriors who served the aristocracy, were attracted to Zen because of its discipline and simplicity. They applied Zen principles to martial arts such as archery and fencing.

Virtually every aspect of Japanese culture has been influenced by Zen. Because monks drank bitter green tea in order to stay awake during meditation, tea drinking grew into an intricate and symbol-laden ritual. The arts also felt the impact of Zen, as manifested in the conciseness of haiku poetry (see page 448). Nearly every art form of classical Japan—painting, poetry, dance, architecture, drama, and even gardening—has been shaped to some degree by Zen, with its emphasis on simplicity, self-discipline, and meditation. Even the expressions of everyday Japanese speech reflect Zen values.

Many teachings from Zen-Buddhism are told in short and delightful stories. They are usually designed to develop the mind and to free it from distortions and so to connect with our spirit.

Some of them are really inspiring and enlightening. It is helpful to the mind to think about them and feel the deeper meaning. Even if it is not possible to grasp them fully, the beauty and simplicity of the message usually gets through to us one way or the other.

***A Cup of Tea***

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a [university professor](http://www.awakeblogger.com/2008/09/the-10-very-best-zen-stories/) who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

***Cliffhanger***

One day while walking through the wilderness a man stumbled upon a vicious tiger. He ran but soon came to the edge of a high cliff. Desperate to save himself, he climbed down a vine and dangled over the fatal precipice.

As he hung there, two mice appeared from a hole in the cliff and began gnawing on the vine.

Suddenly, he noticed on the vine a plump wild strawberry. He plucked it and popped it in his mouth. It was incredibly delicious!

***The Burden***

Two monks were returning to the monastery in the evening. It had rained and there were puddles of water on the road sides. At one place a beautiful young woman was standing unable to walk accross because of a puddle of water. The elder of the two monks went up to a her lifted her and left her on the other side of the road, and continued his way to the monastery.

In the evening the younger monk came to the elder monk and said, "Sir, as monks, we cannot touch a woman ?"

The elder monk answered "yes, brother".

Then the younger monk asks again, "but then Sir, how is that you lifted that woman on the [roadside](http://www.awakeblogger.com/2008/09/the-10-very-best-zen-stories/) ?"

The elder monk smiled at him and told him " I left her on the other side of the road, but you are still carrying her."

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| Parable | Allegory | Themes | Cultural values | Author’s purpose |
| The Prodigal Son |  |  |  |  |
| A Cup of Tea |  |  |  |  |
| Cliffhanger |  |  |  |  |
| The Burden |  |  |  |  |