The standard definition of allegory, according to Joel Fineman in his essay “The Structure of Allegorical Desire”, is embodied in Quintilian’s statement, “Allegory (is) what happens when a single metaphor is introduced in continuous series”. (Allegory and Representation, p. 30) Then, using Roman Jakobson’s amplification that “allegory would be the poetical projection of a metaphoric axis onto the metonymic” (p. 31), Fineman emphasizes the relationship between metaphor and metonymy: at certain points in the structuring of the continuous metaphor, interactions with other metaphors or symbols create further suggestions which lead to a sequence of related meanings, a metonymy of development. Using this formula, the points of interaction create revelations, leading to other revelations, and we have allegory.

Traditional allegory was the concatenation of understood symbols assembled in narrative form and intended for moral instruction. In a modern allegory, belief is questioned and moral instruction becomes mostly criticism of the past with little to comfort confused minds. Virginia Woolf’s last novel, Between the Acts, was written during a time of moral anguish and physical threat, for herself and for the world. Any serious fictional work would have to reflect the dilemmas and moods of that time, 1939–1941. The novel is set in a day in June, 1939, before World War II began, but Virginia Woolf was still writing it in the spring of 1941 when England was under bombardment – and she had pretty much finished it except for a final polish – when she committed suicide in March of that year. The dilemma of peace/war had been resolved: England was at war and invasion was a real threat. Was this a time between the acts of life and death? Were the acts of the pageant a recapitulation of the lived past before the destroyed future? Were we being given intense insights into the lives of the Oliver family and their friends before the final act of destruction, with only dubious hints of regeneration?

Beginning with the title, the controlling metaphor which provides the form and is the source for the ripples of connected meaning in the novel is life-as-theater. Theater holds life at a distance; theater allows for
a temporary if ambiguous catharsis. In form, the novel is scenic, shifting from the thoughts and actions of the family and the audience, back to the scenes of dramatic poetry with background music that they are watching as a performance, then back to more interaction between family members, friends, and audience, then back to scenes of exaggerated melodrama or parodies of old comedy. Just as this amateur pageant of history begins at an arbitrary point, shows us selected eras of literary or social events, and concludes sometime in the future, so the family story begins the evening before the performance, is revealed at intervals during the performance, and concludes after the performance. About twenty-four hours have been allowed for us to grasp the family history and its problems. Time is compressed for both performances – historical and family. The place in which the pageant of history is being given connects the two performances. It is the home of the family and has been theirs for over one hundred years. Thus this place, Pointz Hall, is the first source of metonymic connection between the stories: English history has affected Pointz Hall and personal history is affecting its owners. A second metonymic connection is the game of love that is played in several scenes in the pageant and is also played among the members of the family and their friends. A third metonymic connection is directly related to the metaphor of theatre – its illusionistic goal: as we will see, the villagers create illusions of royalty and riches, and the family and their friends hold back from revealing themselves, creating images and illusions of their selves. A fourth metonymic connection is artistic creation: the writer Miss La Trobe is an artist who creates this work for her own needs and purposes, and the audience plays its role as listeners and reactors, completing the artistic connection.

In a traditional allegory, journeys and changes of place marked significant moments of revelation. In this allegory, the landscape of Pointz Hall must be imagined as changing for the different time periods that are dramatized. In the real life story, the cows, swallows and airplanes that invade the performance at unexpected times transform the passive land into a scene of action. In the real life story, the place seems stable; three generations of Olivers live there and are involved with the church, the villagers, and their own ancestors. But they are uneasy with each other, and the heir to Pointz Hall, Giles, has despairing thoughts about approaching catastrophe. The villagers and the county families participate in this annual event, this ritual, but after the performance their thoughts are anxiously on the future: "It all looks very black. . . . No