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Lessing's importance in the Fable history

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1. Introduction:

There is hardly a man who does not know about Aesop's fables or has not heard or read these short stories as a child. Fables are short stories that carry an important moral lesson and have central characters as talking animals, plants or forces of nature. These stories have been passed down to new generations since time immemorial with Aesop's fables being the most popular of these short stories. The Fox and the Grapes and the Grasshopper and the Ant are some of the most popular short stories ever that teach us important moral lessons. Fables talk about virtues and vices and intend them to be learnt by readers. The use of talking animals serves to make these stories more interesting for the readers (Fable Theory).

The main differences between fairy tales and fables are shortly defined, that for instance fables are characterized by talking animals while fairy tales are full of fairies and their magical world, however, these kinds of short stories are meant for enjoyment of adults as well as for kids. Fables furthermore, have always a hidden meaning which convey a moral truth, hence fairy tales weave a world of magic and leave much room for imagination and fantasy. Moreover, there exists always a conflict between good and evil in fairy tales, whereas it does not consider to fables (Fable Theory).

Fables although have the intention to justify the reality within the matters of life, through the contradictions between rich and poor, just and unjust, powerful and powerless (Karaspolis). On top of that, the aim of Fables is to represent in a way and different kind of social models, and the reveal of social conflicts. One of the most important and famous figure in the German era of Fable Scholarship was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who advocated within rule and order, depicting the fable as a mainly didactic tool (Karaspolis). In addition, Lessing has achieved huge recognition in cases of extraneous ornament and in poetic plays.

2. Bibliography

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was born 1729 in Kamenz and died 1781 in Braunschweig. After years he received a Stipendium by the elector Friedrich August von Sachsen and that offered him the possibility to achieve his high school degree at a first-class school, hence he was awarded as the best student of his generation. After completing school, he went 1746 to the University of Leipzig where he had studied Theology and Philology. He experienced different occasions and parts in his live, although he got once declined from the theater academy in Leipzig, he still kept fighting for his passion. After he travelled and stayed a lot in different places all over Germany, he finished his magister at Wittenberg University and went 1755

back to Leipzig. This time he met a very successful business man, named Christian Gottfried, which declared him to be his companion for his three years of business travel all over Europe. Unfortunately, they had to stop the travel, because the seven-year war was about to come. The time Lessing started to publish his first books was 1759, moreover, he published three books about Fables, but also many romances, theater critiques and newspaper articles. It is important to mention, he got inspired by the acquaintance he had with Justus Möser, afterwards he published a powerful art theoretical treatise of German literature “Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie” (Zeno). Furthermore, he became a leader of the “Hamburger Nationaltheater” as a Dramaturge and Advisor, after few month he changed his place of work and started to work at “Mannheimer Nationaltheater”, where he even entered the management position. His private life was littered with many tragedies, he married his wife Eva König 1776 and one year later they became parents, but the baby died within 25 hours. After one year also, his wife died (Zeno). However, this did not stop Lessing to write his most famous book, which is called “Nathan der Weise”. Even nowadays its read by many people and used as a must-read book in schools.

He became that famous and known in German literature, that related to his fables the synonyms of “Lessingsche” (short, simple, highly moral) or “Lafontainsche” (artistic) were born (Karapolis).

3. History of his Fable Theory

Mostly his performances within the Fables contain the confrontation between the animals and the stereotypes which are linked by characterization of human beings. Affected by the society circumstances and the time of Enlightenment, influenced his perspectives and writing a lot, in which he tried to combine reality and real occasions and his fantasy by choosing animals (Lessing). His Fables represent always circumstances from his daily life situations. Furthermore, this is the reason why Lessing puts the animals into a specific role model of a human character, in which the animal continuously finds itself (Jethsmith). For instance, the smart fox, and the powerful lion. The only disadvantage about characterizing animals and let them speak, is that this will never happen, so even though we find ourselves in realistic stories with morals and animals with human characters, on the other hand we have the fact of unrealistic speaking animals.

Lessing defined his Fable theory the way that the Moral in a Fable always contains

an occasion, in which the reality becomes a new dimension and moreover, that is the way he starts to formulate a Fable story. On top of that his Fables have the aim to teach a moral message more than just being an instrument of entertainment (Jethsmith). Furthermore, the way he wrote the Fables was almost every time, in short but meaningful sentences in which the reality content is significant and high. However, the biggest influence in his work were the Fables of Aesop. On the other hand, Lessing wanted to make himself and his fables understood as a theory which combines praxis and in addition he says it is important to read fables and their treatise always as an affect each other (Aesopic Fables).

It is interesting, that his fables mostly contain the same structure as the Enlightenment. First the point, that all people shall be treated the same, equality, means also that everyone can use its own thoughts (Fable Theory). Second to be able to self- restraint. In addition to his main thoughts about Fables, he wants to show human action against nature and this can be used as a tool to educate and teach. This is a main reason, why his fables are used in schools to educate children and to flourish their creativity. Especially because he uses animals with human character settings, which makes it easier for children to understand and to interpret the moral and issue of the story.

3.1 Importance of Animals

Every animal in Lessing's Fables embodies a human character setting, with whom you can also be confronted in real life, although the circumstances and situation in society and private life continuously change, the characters of the animals may also change due the change of occasion and situation in which they may find themselves (jehsmith). The characters in the fables are animals, because they represent the rule of instinct which combines the appropriated strategies for survival. Animals are not used to tell miracles; these creatures have language and reason is presupposed in fables. Somehow, he wants to create an understanding between the readers and his fables, in which it shall be in accordance with the common course of nature at that time and not showing up with miracles. The reason why Lessing uses Animals as Characters in his Fables and not Human, can be linked with a widely known constancy of their characters (jehsmith). Of course, the possibility to create your own character type of animal consists, however his aim was, what can we learn from it. There are two reasons for the replacement of human beings by animals in fables. The first is, that we all tend to recognize more readily the sort of character represented by an animal species than by a human being (jehsmith). The second reason is more linked with sensibility as a common trope

of the distinctly German reception of Enlightenment values rather than from logical conclusions. On top of that, his aim is to teach a moral lesson more than a passion.

Actually, the writer of this Fable “the wolf and the lamb¹” is Aesop, nonetheless, either de la Fontain and Lessing used this Fable to overwrite it again in their own words. Lessing says, that this is the best example of morality and the message behind it, that’s why he likes to use it also for his own inspiration.



The old picture out of Aesops book.



New version.

3.2 Importance of Moral

In his theory the compound of his fables explicit moral is most likely applied to a specific case, usually for polemical ends. “Phaedrus, a former slave, praises the fable as a means for the oppressed to impart unwelcome truth to the powerful” what Lessing wrote in his Abstract (Lessing’s Abstract). On the other hand, the ancient fables have more commonly adopted the perspective of the powerless, who can perhaps outwit, but not directly challenge the ‘stronger’ one. Lessing struggles in his life almost as much as Aesop at his time, although it is not comparable the brutality of struggle for existence, but it is a main moral aspect in both fabulist fable understanding (Lessing’s Abstract). Moreover, the term of a human struggling in the world is called “homo lupus homini”. It is interesting to see the point of view, what Lessing once has published, he said the aim of his Fables were cunning and opportunism and not moral or political principles are the indicators for survival.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPIARrEb5Rc> access 30.11.2017

One example for a change even in the moral history of Lessing's Fable is 'hungry Fox' ('hungriger Fuchs'²): Ich bin zu einer unglücklichen Stunde geboren!" so klagte ein junger Fuchs einem alten. "Fast keiner von meinen Anschlägen will mir gelingen."

"Deine Anschläge", sagte der ältere Fuchs, "werden ohne Zweifel doch klug sein. Lass doch hören, wann machst du deine Anschläge?"

"Wann ich sie mache? Wann anders, als wenn mich hungert?"

"Wenn dich hungert?" fuhr der alte Fuchs fort. "Ja! da haben wir es! Hunger und Überlegung sind nie beisammen. Mache sie künftig, wenn du satt bist, und sie werden besser ausfallen."

(Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, deutscher Schriftsteller, 1729 – 1781)

Moral: Wer etwas zu schnell und unüberlegt haben will, handelt oft mit Fehlern“).

It is only published in German, but there is the same title with a different moral story also to find. Actually, what this story shows, is that in each language, there may exist Fables and in other they may exist too, but not with the completely same content or even with a completely different moral message.

4. Comparison of fables by Jean de La Fontaine and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

During the history, different styles of fables appeared, who vary between each other. In this term, a fable can be religious, moral or live wisely. The religious style appears through a repression of the world and you can find expressions of religious dogmata. The moral style shows, that moral acting in the world should be chosen by everyone. The live wisely style functions in the sense of advising. There is also a style which is criticizing, and pointing sharply on social and political conditions. It often uses a satirical tone and ridicules the society and its people (Leibfried, 1973: 34).

Following, I will compare the uses of moral telling through fables of Jean de la Fontaine and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Therefore, I will look on their fables and compare them in terms of moral message and use of words. La Fountain and Lessing used both a kind of criticizing style but in a very different way. It is to see that both presented a different moral message through telling the "same fable", with some variation. La Fontaine lived in the 17th century in France and Lessing in the 18th century in Germany. This fact shows already a different political and social context. They both still have many things in common and it seems, that

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbbG043kXUc> access 28.11.17

Lessing learned and took over a lot by La Fontaine especially in the field of content and structure (Pejić 2014: 16).

La Fontaine was one of the most eloquent poets and together with Aesop, Phaedrus and de La Motte is he one of the important founders of fables. Many writers followed their path and became imitators. La Fontaine used fables as a literature invention instead of real happenings (Hasubek, 1982: 86). Lessing's fables were first of all sociocritical and part of the idea of the enlightenment. They can be described as a mix between moral and political fables (Siegrist, 1984: 253). He used his fables fighting against boast and swagger. Both authors used their fables to show the motives and changing of culture, society and time. Generally, La Fontaine's fables were written for the people at court and Lessing wrote for all kind of people. That is seen in their style and expressions. Even though many things are in common, there are some essential differences in the content and therefore in the message of their fables (Pejić 2014: 16). To see these differences, I will compare the two fables "The Crow and the Fox" and "The Wolf and the Lamb" in the versions of La Fontaine and Lessing and point out their greatest distinctions. You will find all versions and some translation in the end of this paper.

4.1 The Crow and the Fox - Rabe und Fuchs

A very interesting fable to compare the two authors is the fable of the Crow and the Fox. There exist different versions of it, which leads to very different endings and therefore messages and point of critics. In La Fontaine's version, the fox is shown as the clever part, who charms the Crow to sing: "How beautiful you are! how nice you seem to me!" (co-lingua) to let fall the cheese in his mouse. The fable obviously is about a flatterer, and his victim who falls for him. The Crow learns his lesson to be careful with others pleasing and praising him, only for their own benefit. The fable tells, that suspicion towards compliments and praises by others in order to push the self-love, can come out of a self-interest and therefore requests a high prize. The prize for the lesson learned here is the cheese (Schneider: 5):

My good man, Learn that every flatterer

Lives at the expense of the one who listens to him.

This lesson, without doubt, is well worth a cheese."

The Crow, ashamed and embarrassed,

Swore, but a little late, that he would not be taken again. (Co-lingua).

The crow loses not only the cheese, but also his dignity, being humiliated by the fox, destroying the narcissistic picture of self-love.

In Lessings version, the cheese is replaced by a poisoned piece of meat. The characters are still the same, the fox is the clever one and the crow is the stupid one, who enjoys the fox flattering praise. But Lessing made some essential changes. After getting the meat from the crow, the fox it poisons by it and dies. The message is given at the end of the fable: „*Möchtet ihr euch nie etwas anderes als Gift erloben, verdammte Schmeichler!*“ (*Das kleine Fabelbuch*: 28), that flatterer should never earn something else than poison. Lessing is punishing the flattering lies, and provides therefor justice in killing the fox through the poisoning. It seems, that Lessing surpasses La Fontaine in punishing his main character. He criticizes the fox, representing the bourgeoisie, that is flattering the crow, which presents the nobility, to get a higher position in society (Pejić 2014: 13). Lessings fable can be interpreted as a critique towards La Fontaines fable, changing the message towards a condemnation with flattering for justice (Schneider: 4). Lessing adjudges the noble pretense and falsehood and criticizes and the same time La Fontains plot, who lets the fox get away with the flattering and even reach his aim to get the cheese. The fable takes the same role as the astute fox, as it turns away from judging the falsity and injustice (Schneider: 7).

4.2 The Wolf and the Lamb - Der Wolf und das Lamm

In both versions, there are a wolf and a lamp drinking at a river. In the version of La Fontaine, the wolf gets angry with the lamp for drinking from the same water and polluting it. The lamp excuses himself and explains that there will be no pollution from him reaching the wolf due to the water current. Furthermore, the wolf excuses the lamp of gossiping about the wolf. The relation is made clear between the arrogant wolf, which stands socially higher than the lamp and expects to be threatened in this way. The lamp, which is clearly weaker but also more intelligent, feels the unfair treatment and responds to that. The fable ends with the wolf eating the lamp. The moral of this messages is already written down in the beginning:

“The reason of those best able to have their way is always the best: We now show how this is true.” Expressed in German: “*Das Recht des Stärkern ist am meisten wert. Hört, wie es diese Fabel lehrt.*“ (Zeno.org).

It tells that the strong one, will always win, even though the weak one is more intelligent and is right. The wolf is the strong one who uses his will and thinking to act towards the lamp,

which is without rights, weak and stupid in terms, that it starts a conversation with the wolf. The fable can be seen as relating to the political situation in France, especially on Ludwig the 14th and the Absolutism, represented through the wolf (Pejić 2014: 9).

Lessings version uses the same setting, but due to the water stream, the wolf is too far to get the lamp. The lamp teases the wolf, and scoffs at him; *“ich mache dir doch das Wasser nicht trübe, Herr Wolf?”*, he asks the wolf if he didn’t pollute his water. Here is a clear reference to La Fontaines version, which can even be understood as a comment to it. In comparison to the ending of La Fontaine, where the hungry wolf eats the lamp, Lessing’s version ends with the wolf angrily turning off, even bears with the lamb, which is unusual for the character of the wolf in fables. The reader is not informed, if the wolf even intended to eat the lamp after all (Pejić 2014: 8). The message eventually could be, that the strong one is not essentially the intelligent one, but the weak one can be cleverer than the ones with most power (Pejić 2014: 9).

La Fontaine - Der Rabe und der Fuchs

Im Schnabel einen Käse haltend, hockt
Auf einem Baumast Meister Rabe.
Von dieses Käses Duft herbeigelockt,
Spricht Meister Fuchs, der schlaue Knabe:
„Ah! Herr von Rabe, guten Tag!
Wie nett Ihr seid und von wie feinem Schlag!
Entspricht dem glänzenden Gefieder
Nun auch der Wohlklang Eurer Lieder,
Dann seid der Phönix Ihr in diesem
Waldrevier."
Dem Raben hüpfte das Herz vor Lust. Der
Stimme Zier
Zu künden, tut mit stolzem Sinn
Er weit den Schnabel auf; da - fällt der Käse
hin.
Der Fuchs nimmt ihn und spricht:
„Mein Freundchen, denkt an mich!
Ein jeder Schmeichler mästet sich
Vom Fette des, der willig auf ihn hört.
Die Lehr ist zweifellos wohl - einen Käse
wert!"
Der Rabe, schäm- und reuevoll,
Schwört - etwas spät -, dass niemand ihn mehr
fangen soll.
(Das kleine Fabelbuch: 24, 25)

Lessing - Der Rabe und der Fuchs

Ein Rabe trug ein Stück vergiftetes Fleisch, das
der erzürnte Gärtner für die Katzen seines
Nachbarn hingeworfen hatte, in seinen Klauen
fort. Und eben wollte er es auf einer alten
Eiche verzehren, als sich ein Fuchs herbei-
schlich und ihm zurief: „Sei mir gesegnet,
Vogel des Jupiter!“
„Für wen siehst du mich an?“ fragte der Rabe.
„Für wen ich dich ansehe?“ erwiderte der
Fuchs. „Bist du nicht der rüs-tige Adler, der
täglich von der Rechten des Zeus auf diese
Eiche herab-kommt, mich Armen zu speisen?
Warum verstellst du dich? Sehe ich denn nicht
in der siegreichen Klaue die erflehte Gabe, die
mir dein Gott durch dich zu schicken noch
fortfährt?“
Der Rabe erstaunte und freute sich innig, für
einen Adler gehalten zu werden. „Ich muss“,
dachte er, „den Fuchs aus diesem Irrtum nicht
brin-gen.“ - Großmütig

The Crow and the Fox

by La Fontaine

Master Crow perched on a tree,
Was holding a cheese in his beak.
Master Fox attracted by the smell
Said something like this:
"Well, Hello Mister Crow!
How beautiful you are! how nice you seem to
me!
Really, if your voice
Is like your plumage,
You are the phoenix of all the inhabitants of
these woods."
At these words, the Crow is overjoyed.
And in order to show off his beautiful voice,
He opens his beak wide, lets his prey fall
The Fox grabs it, and says: "My good man,
Learn that every flatterer
Lives at the expense of the one who listens to
him.
This lesson, without doubt, is well worth a
cheese."
The Crow, ashamed and embarrassed,
Swore, but a little late, that he would not be
taken again (Co-lingua).

dumm ließ er ihm also seinen Raub herabfallen
und flog stolz davon.
Der Fuchs fing das Fleisch lachend auf und
fraß es mit boshafter Freude. Doch bald
verkehrte sich die Freude in ein
schmerzhaftes Gefühl: Das Gift fing an zu
wirken, und er verreckte.
Möchtet ihr euch nie etwas anderes als Gift
erloben, **verdammte Schmeichler!**
(Das kleine Fabelbuch: 27,28).

La Fontaine - Der Wolf und das Lamm

Das Recht des Stärkern ist am meisten wert.
Hört, wie es diese Fabel lehrt.
Ein Lämmchen löschte in der Flut
Des klaren Quells des Durstes Glut.
Da lag – o böses Ungemach! –
Ein Räuber an demselben Bach,
Ein wilder Wolf, mit leerem Bauch.
Der rief voll Gier und Wut:
»Wer lehrte dich so kühnen Brauch,
Zu trüben meinen Trank?
Wer Frevel treibt, der sühnt es auch!«
Das Lämmchen zitterte und sank
Demütig in die Knie.
»Sire,« sprach es, »Sire, bedenken Sie,
Daß ich weit unterhalb von Ihrem Platze trank,
Und da die Wellen talwärts gehn,
Blieb dort, wo Eure Majestät geruhn zu stehn,
Das Wasser ungetrübt und blank.«
»Du trübst es doch!« rief streng das wilde Tier.
»Auch weiß ich, daß vor Jahresfrist du mir
Viel Übles nachgeredet hast.« – »Vor einem
Jahr?«
Entgegnete das Lamm, »eh ich geboren war?
Ich trink noch heute an der Mutter, Sire!«
»So war's ein Bruder denn von dir.«
»Ich habe keinen.« – »Nun, so war's aus
deinem Bunde
Ein andrer – wie ihr immer schimpflich von
mir denkt,
Ihr, eure Hirten, eure Hunde.^[14]
Man sagte mir's. Und weil ihr mich gekränkt,
Ihr, die ihr sämtlich Bösewichter,
So muß ich Rache üben alsobald.«
Er griff das Lamm und schleppte es zum Wald
Und fraß es – ohne Recht und Richter.
(Zeno.org).

Lessing - Der Wolf und das Schaf

Der Durst trieb ein Schaf an den Fluß; eine
gleiche Ursache führte auf der andern Seite
einen Wolf herzu. Durch die Drennung des
Wassers gesichert und durch die Sicherheit
höhnisch gemacht, rief das Schaf dem Räuber
hinüber: »ich mache dir doch das Wasser nicht
trübe, Herr Wolf? Sieh mich recht an; habe ich
dir nicht etwa vor sechs Wochen
nachgeschimpft? Wenigstens wird es mein
Vater gewesen sein.« Der Wolf verstand die
Spöttelei; er betrachtete die Breite des Flusses
und knirschte mit den Zähnen. Es ist dein
Glück, antwortete er, daß wir Wölfe gewohnt
sind, mit euch Schafen Geduld zu haben; und
ging mit stolzen Schritten weiter (Zeno.org).

The Wolf and the Lamb

By La Fontaine

The reason of those best able to have their way
is always the best:
We now show how this is true.
A lamb was quenching its thirst
In the water of a pure stream.
A fasting wolf came by, looking for
something;
He was attracted by hunger to this place.
What makes you so bold as to meddle with my
drinking?
Said this animal, very angry.
You will be punished for your boldness.
Sir, answered the lamb, let Your Majesty
Not put himself into a rage;
But rather, let him consider
That I am taking a drink of water
In the stream
More than twenty steps below him;
And that, consequently, in no way,
Am I troubling his supply.
You do trouble it, answered the cruel beast.
And I know you said bad things of me last
year.
How could I do that when I wasn't born,
Answered the lamb; I am still at my mother's
breast.
If it wasn't you, then it was your brother.
I haven't a brother. It was then someone close
to you;
For you have no sympathy for me,
You, your shepherds and your dogs.
I have been told of this. I have to make things
even.
Saying this, into the woods
The wolf carries the lamb, and then eats him
Without any other why or wherefore.
(Aestheticrealism.net).

5. Literature:

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