

JEAN DE LA FONTAINE'S FABLES

The diffusion of Aesopic Fables in Europe



Mila FREMONDIERE and Violaine HAUDEBAULT
Erasmus students
2017-2018

Sommaire

Jean de la Fontaine's bibliography.....	2
The historical context.....	3
The use of animals.....	4
The use of morals.....	6
How fables have evolved and what remains of them today?.....	8
Why choose to study La Fontaine today at school?.....	9
Fables through generations.....	11
How fables are carried on nowadays?.....	12
Bibliography.....	14

Jean de la Fontaine's bibliography

Jean de la Fontaine is a French fable writer in the 17th century. He was born in 1621 in Château-Thierry in France. In 1641, he went to a French school: l'Oratoire to study theology. However, the following year, he let them in order to start law's studies. In 1649, he received his diploma and became a lawyer in Paris. He published his first book in 1654 called "L'Eunuque" – a translation from Terence's writing - it was unsuccessful.



After the death of his father, Charles de la Fontaine, in 1656, he was crippled with debts. Thus, he was in Nicolas Fouquet's service, superintendent of Finances. Thanks to him, Jean de la Fontaine met lots of artists as Molière or Charles Perrault. Eight years later, he met the duchess of Orléans and became his gentleman. This is the turning point of his literature's career. The following years, he published different books and it was a success, especially for the fables' one, in 1668. If this collection of fables was dedicated to the Dauphin, his second one was published in 1678 for Madame de Montespan, Louis XIV's mistress. After the death of Jean-Baptiste Colbert in 1683, he entered in the French Academy. In 1693, he published his last collection of fables for the Duke of Bourgogne. He died in 1695 in Paris because of a tuberculosis.

Across the ages, the fables of Jean de la Fontaine are still current and modern. This author drew his inspiration from lots of ancient writers as Pilpay, Aesop and Horace. He modernized literature with a new genre: short stories with their morals in the end.

The historical context

Jean de la Fontaine wrote his fables during the reign of Louis XIV in France, in the 17th century. The absolute monarchy means that the whole powers are in the hands of a king. Consequently, the Sun King had a stranglehold on arts and he was known for highlighting lots of artists. Sculpture, theatre, dance, music and painting were used to assure the king's influence in his own kingdom but also in Europe. Thanks to the control of literature, he could show how strong-minded he was. This reign was also part of a period called Renaissance. It is a cultural movement with a breakthrough in Italy in the 15th century. It is the ideas of the Antiquity which came back. They started to involve a new way of thinking about literature, poetry...



During this period, art was only accessible to rich people even if they started to educate poor children and to have a mass education. Indeed, in the 16th century, the Reformation area was the starting point of the ambition to massive education in our society. For the first time, philosophers thought about education for the poorest people in the society. Women as men should have some kind of education, they need to know how to learn and how to read. From the 17th century, more and more people went to school. However, there were lots of differences between the school for rich people and for poor people. For lower social classes, children went to school until they reached the age of 7 years. The most important aim in these schools was to keep the children from the streets, for doing small crimes, for not disturbing the society. There was no place to learn poetry, literature, physics, ... For upper social classes, schools were totally different. There was a lot of ideas from the pedagogy from the Antiquity. The subjects were different: literature, poetry, speech, astronomy, mathematics, engineering, physical trade, ... Thus, literature was not really accessible to the poor social classes at this time because they were not able to read.

The use of animals

In a lot of his fables, Jean de la Fontaine uses animals as foxes, wolves, donkeys, frogs, mice... and this use is not insignificant. This is why it is important to understand their symbolism to know the message he wanted to spread. For some of them, their representations are quite simple. For example, the foxes embody craftiness, intelligence and trickery while the lambs represent ignorance, kindness and weakness. Jean de la Fontaine uses animals as a mirror of the human world. One of his famous sentences was: “*I am using animals to educate humans.*” (“*Je me sers d’animaux pour instruire les hommes.*”) Thus, thanks these characters, humans are able to understand the morals of the stories and can recognize themselves in them. At this end of the fable, Jean de la Fontaine attracts men to teach lessons of the story.

In his writings, the French fabulist was doing more than just using beasts as heroes, he let them speak and give them men’s attitudes. Thanks to these allegories, he gave human’s attributes to animals and this is why we can characterize fables as fantastic literature. Moreover, this point shows a real important aspect of Jean de la Fontaine’s thinking about nature. He was not an adept of naturalism and did not want to be part of this. This was an artistic movement in literature which had for goal the true representation of things with the use of human and social sciences. In a general meaning, it was a way of thinking which assured that nature exists by itself and that everything comes from nature because it is the first reality of the world.

In conflict with these ideas, Jean de la Fontaine believed that animals are able to think even if he admitted that this power is not that puissant and developed than humans. Noel emphasized this point by writing: “He [Jean de la Fontaine] agreed that their thought was limited to immediate events and they could not process data posteriori.”. Thus, we can notice that the French fabulist disagreed with René Descartes’ point of view. The French philosopher of the 17th century, believed in the theory of “animal machine”. This one is based on the conviction that animals have neither spirit nor reason. According to him, animals are machines that are



controlled by automatic reflects and reactions. The liberty that God had when he created the world and nature is, to Descartes, close to human willpower. This is what creates the

separation between men and other creatures, as animals: “Willpower determine us.” (“La volonté nous détermine.”).

In contradiction with René Descartes, Jean de la Fontaine criticized openly the notion of “animal machine” and countered it by giving some examples of animals’ behaviours that seem to think. He added his argues by saying that nature and God, as spirit and body, are so muddled up that it is impossible to separate them. According to him, because of the ignorance we have about nature, the distinction between men, animals and plants stay uncertain. Thanks to this understanding of Jean de la Fontaine’s ideas, we can better figure out his intentions of describing the society with the use of animals.

The use of morals

Fables cannot be named fables if they have not morals. They consist in a formula which resumes and brings out the virtues of the society. Their goal is to teach lessons of how the society should be, by criticizing how it is in reality. According to Jean de la Fontaine, a moralist is the person who identifies the vices of men and it is not someone who teach a moral. We can distinct two different categories of morals.

On one hand, there are the explicit ones, these which are easy to determine. Most of the time, they are in the beginning or in the end of the fables as, for example: “*The right of*



the stronger is always better” (“*La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure*”) in The Wolf and the Lamb (Le Loup et l'Agneau). This famous moral supposes that justice is dominated

by a “natural” rule that it cannot deal with. Normally, justice must be equal and fair for every man, no matter their gender, their age or their social class and it is based on the human rights.

In this fable, Jean de la Fontaine emphasized on the fact that some men use their power (intellectual, physical, economic or social) to weaken other people and to triumph. The powerful

people are represented by the wolf, symbol of strength, violence and cruelty and the others are embodied with the lamb, emblem of ignorance, kindness and weakness.

On the other hand, there are implicit morals which are not clearly expressed or which seem to be easy to understand but that suppose a complex reflection. This is the reason why we can confirm that the aim of the fables is also pedagogical. Jean de la Fontaine let his readers search, think and understand his writings and it was also a good way to be protected from the censorship and possible punishments from the Church and the Royalty. To illustrate this point, we can take the example of The Cicada and the Ant (La Cigale et la Fourmi). When we read this fable, we have a first feeling about the moral: Jean de la Fontaine denounced idleness and emphasized on the benefits of working. However, after a due reflection, we can understand that the moral is more complex and has an implicit version. Indeed, when we focus on the symbolism of these two animals, we are able to comprehend that the French fabulist did not really want to question and criticize the cicada’s behaviour. The latter represents joy, generosity and honesty, which are all qualities, while the ant stands for

cupidity, selfishness and disdain, in other words: vices. Jean de la Fontaine accentuated these representations with the two different lexical fields he gave for the two beasts. We can have this feeling and have more sympathy for the Cicada than for the ant. Thus, the implicit moral of this fable is dealing with the criticism of avarice and nastiness. Thanks to this example, we can notice that Jean de la Fontaine agreed Epicure's philosophy. For them, it is essential to live life to the full, from day to day. It is also important to be reasonable and to have wishes that you can get. *"Enjoy life means enjoy what we have."* (*"Profiter de la vie, c'est profiter de ce qu'on a."*).

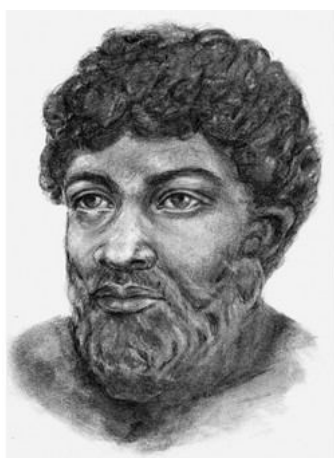


How fables have evolved and what remains of them today?

Jean de La Fontaine's fables have crossed centuries and yet their impact and message remain intact. The cicada who sang all summer, this raven perched on a tree, this hen with golden eggs, today, all these heroes are part of our collective memory. There are all so popular even now: on library's shelves, tens of publication pay tribute to these fables, adapt them in comic book, for kids or adults... Now why is that? Why La Fontaine's fables still cause such enthusiasm?

First of all, because of the form. Fable is a succinct text, which is a very serious marketing argument in the XXI century. Then the fabulist is not the accuser, he is never judging but instead he is letting the interpretation to the reader; this clear-sightedness from La Fontaine is one of the key to his success. In fact, by doing so, his fables are timeless, there are immortal because they can apply to any people regarding of their social status, their genre, their age, and to any century; even in year 3065, these fables would most probably still have a meaning. Furthermore, this is the use of a present of universal truth (*"présent de vérité générale"* in French), in the fables that gives this timeless and vivacious lecture.

To continue, in the preface of La Fontaine's fables we can read these few lines: *"It may be possible that my work will result in other's people desire to carry on the thing further"* (*"Il arrivera possible que mon travail fera naître à d'autres personnes l'envie de porter la chose plus loin"*). The fabulist got it right since his fables are an inexhaustible source of project, in schools and elsewhere.



To this day, in classrooms where we teach French, we keep on teaching *"Jean de La Fontaine's fables"*, at the same time and implicitly, we teach Aesop's fables and Greek civilisation. La Fontaine was saying by the way: *"I am singing heroes of which Aesop is the father"* (*"Je chante les héros dont Esope est le père"*). The filiation between the two fabulists, La Fontaine and Aesop is clear. These two countries are both concerned about democracy and human rights and their history is rich of amazing experiences. The bond between those two countries is certain.

Why choose to study La Fontaine today at school?

First of all, fables have an educational and philosophical vocation. They are used like a learning support in reading, morals and civicism. Over the reading, we discover that morals are various and speak now and ever to children. Especially with themes like: relationship with others, appearance or self-esteem, so many topics that are absolutely necessary to talk about in the first years of school.

To continue, fables are a good way to raise awareness among children about literary pleasure and short texts. To do so, animals have a powerful way to reach kids. In fact, many stories in children's literature work with the use of animals. In La Fontaine's fables, animals are characters which convey values and adventures, they allow kids to broaden their imagination. Thanks to animals' allegory the narrative outline is really convincing for young children, it allows them to see further in a way that they understand.

Furthermore, fables have an educational role. In these fables, Jean de La Fontaine established the rules for living together, what we can do and what we can't. Fables are a space in which children can confront their opinion with the others. Thus, since 2002, "*justify his opinion, accept other's opinion and debate*" figure in the program of the CE2, CM1 and CM2 in France (Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6). Plus, fables are most of the time implicit, thus they are an opening for the interpretation of children and solicit their reflexion.

To carry on, and because it's maybe their characteristic the most specific, La Fontaine's fables develop an aesthetics of the conversation. Abundant in dialogues, stories are composed with a polyphony of narrative voices, which give them their theatrical dimension. Sometimes, morals come themselves from a person's mouth, like the fox in The Fox and the Crow (Le Corbeau et le Renard): "Learn, Mister Crow, that all flatterers live at the expense of those who listen to them!" ("Apprenez, Monsieur du Corbeau, que tout flatteur vit au dépend de celui qui l'écoute !"). If we see fables in this perspective, they can become a phenomenal source of expression and a great opportunity for a theatre project. Put the fables on stage is indeed a very good idea to combine oratory exercise, use body language and deal with



moral issues at the same time. Using the fables in a theatrical way is also a recreational activity to broach the work of La Fontaine.

La Fontaine's fables are today institutionally recognized for having values in children's literature and for their pedagogical interest. Aware of its impact on children's culture, the French Minister of National Education, Michel Blanquer (elected in May 2017) had announced in June 2017 that the French State will distribute an example of La Fontaine's fables to the 150 000 CM2 students. This operation called "A book for holidays" was designed to promote reading and to create a teaching material right after the return from the summer holidays in September.

Fables through generations

Fables have a complex literary structure, which go back to ancient tradition (Aesop, VI century B.C). La Fontaine's ancient vocabulary can be seen as an obstacle for the reading. In fact, he employed a very special language, in his writing style we can notice a certain sound, like a waltz language actually. Every line of verse has a different rhythm. A kid can quickly seize those sounds and understand the structure of it. We are dealing here with a music of the language that can easily be learned. The interest of using fables at school, is also to encourage the kid to memorize and to take possession of the text so that he can recite it in front of his classmate.

School is today the main vector for the diffusion of the fables, especially through recitation. With Jacques Prévert's poetry, fable remains the star of class' recitations. The latter is, even nowadays, the only poetic heritage shared with several generations. Fables have the merit of being part of a common culture between children, their parents and their grandparents. Moreover, every person and particularly the adult has the need of hearing and telling stories, fables are thus intergenerational. Despite the fact that La Fontaine's fables have a strong resonance in children' education, we can firmly say that the public of the fables is much vaster than that, it can touch the young and the not so young, from this generation to one another. The power of La Fontaine's fables is then inexhaustible.

La Fontaine ones said: *"Everything speaks in my work, even fish. What they say speaks to everyone. I am using animals to educate humans"* (*"Tout parle en mon ouvrage; et même les poissons; Ce qu'ils disent s'adresse à tous tant que nous sommes. Je me sers d'animaux pour instruire les hommes"*). Here, when he talks about humans, he includes of course adults as well as children without any distinction.

Once again, La Fontaine, with this sentence is referring to the Greek author: Aesop. Indeed, he is paying a tribute to him, the man who inspired him so much. In fact, Aesop used to take animals as a medium to depict the society in order to, in an implicit way, educate people.

How fables are carried on nowadays?

The spirit and the message of the fables remains in recitation and performing in schools and are passed on from one generation to the next like mentioned above. However, other means are used in order to perpetuate Jean de La Fontaine's fables.

On the one hand and according to "*L'Echo*", a franco-hellenic newspaper published in 2011, the Saint-Paul's franco-hellenic school from Athens, is perpetuating this knowledge of fables through an annual story competition. Each year, students are rewarded for their commitment in the task. This school created a fables contest, once reserved to the students of the region but now extended across France and the Francophone countries. The headteacher of the school named M. Dimitri Varthalitis, is passionate about the subject; thus, he created the CIREL, an International Research Center for the work of Aesop and La Fontaine ("*Centre International de Recherche Aesop-La fontaine*"). This centre holds multiple fables' editions of the Greek author and the French fabulist. This Athenian school, with his competition, succeed in emphasizing the bond between the two men, keep on maintain the link between those two countries and the history they have together.

On the other hand, there is another way to perpetuate La Fontaine's fables, which is actually by the means of museum. In fact, museums have the important national tasks to develop their educational part, interact with the community and promote the heritage of the country in an educational way. Jean de La Fontaine's Museum located *12 rue Jean de La Fontaine, 02400 CHATEAU-THIERRY (FRANCE)*, helps to keep this knowledge that we have on the French fabulist and maintains his work and memory in today's society. This house was in the past his birthplace, La Fontaine's sold it in 1676, aged 55 years old and settled in Paris. Many owners will follow after him and the house will become museum in 1876. Today it is recognized by the French Government and benefits from the French Museum designation. Inside, the architecture reflects the style of the era, rooms have been preserved with their paintings, engravings and art objects; his fables are represented through different supports in the museum: earthenware, porcelain, silverware, terra cotta, furniture or again tapestry. With all these decorative objects, Jean de La Fontaine enters in French daily life. Certain renovations were made while preserving the building's authenticity of olden times. Today this museum is an integral part of our historic heritage and is a good reminder of La Fontaine's life.

Finally, in France, La Fontaine remains known by the general public thanks to the



famous theme park: *Puy du Fou*. Created in 1978, the park is based on an historic thematises, it is located in the department of Vendée. The Puy du Fou has been rewarded repeatedly since 2012: *Best Worldwide Park* in 2012, *Best European Theme Park* in 2013, a second time *Best Worldwide Park* in 2014 and more recently *European Top New Attraction* in 2016 for “Le

Dernier Panache”. The *Puy du Fou* has become in just a few years a global reference in the universe of theme parks and shows.

In 2012, the park presents a new attraction called: The Imaginary World of la Fontaine (“*Le Monde Imaginaire de La Fontaine*”). It shows the fables in an interactive way on a text reads by the French actor Gérard Depardieu and in which the spectator can meander in a greenery labyrinth and play area for children. This attraction is a real little world, mostly dedicated for



children within the *Puy du*

Fou. Jean de La Fontaine’s garden invites people to discover the fables through the famous animals of the fabulist: the cow, the crow, the lion, the fox, the rabbit or even the Goose that laid the Golden Eggs. It’s a place where trees and animals can speak, statues are awakened and surprises come one after another on the passage.

“The tale of the oak-tree and the reed”

Bibliography

- <http://www.linternaute.com/biographie/jean-de-la-fontaine/>
- <https://www.babelio.com/auteur/Jean-de-La-Fontaine/50414>
- https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_de_La_Fontaine#Ann.C3.A9es_de_formation_.281641-1658.29
- <https://www.reviser-bac.fr/francais/dissertations/quel-est-le-but-de-la-fontaine-en-ecrivant-les-fables/>
- <https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00834060/document>
- <http://www.gauchemip.org/spip.php?article11207>
- file:///C:/Users/Violaine/Downloads/LEcho-15-%CE%94%CE%B5%CE%BA%CE%AD%CE%BC%CE%B2%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%BF%CF%82-2011.pdf
- McClure Ellen, « Le monde de La Fontaine : Œuvre sans auteur ? », *Dix-septième siècle*, 2013/1 (n° 258), p. 65-73. DOI : 10.3917/dss.131.0065. URL : <https://srvext.uco.fr:2287/revue-dix-septieme-siecle-2013-1-page-65.htm>
- <https://dicophilo.fr/definition/animal-machine/>
- <http://www.leparisien.fr/loisirs-et-spectacles/pourquoi-les-fables-sont-immortelles-11-02-2010-811605.php>
- <http://www.vosquestionsdeparents.fr/dossier/799/fables-de-la-fontaine-qu'apprennent-elles-aux-enfants>
- <http://www.musee-jean-de-la-fontaine.fr/jean-de-la-fontaine-page-fr-1-0-1.html>
- <http://www.lafontaine.net/lesFables/pageFable.php?page=53>
- <http://www.puydufou.com/fr/le-monde-imaginaire-de-la-fontaine>