

## **Aesop's fables**

Aesop is presumed to be the originator of fables, in which animal characters behave like human beings. Little is known of Aesop's life, and some scholars doubt if he ever existed. However, according to the Greek historian Herodotus, he lived about 570 B.C., and was a slave of Iadmon of Samos. He was born ugly, and mute, and some stories say he was deaf as well, but he was granted the power to speak and craft fables in return for his generosity to one of the attendants of the goddess Isis, and he was then freed by his master. The Fable contains a short narrative, but it also seeks to convey a hidden meaning, seeking to teach some moral lesson, social duty, or political truth. The true Fable aims at the improvement of human conduct, but it conceals its design under the disguise of fictitious characters, so that the reader receives the advice without perceiving the presence of the adviser. The combination of an entertaining story with moral instruction creates the charm, and accounts for the universal favour, of the fables of Aesop.

The construction of a fable involves attention to (1) the narration itself; (2) the deduction of the moral; and (3) a careful maintenance of the individual characteristics of the fictitious personages introduced into it. The narration should relate to one simple action, The moral or lesson should be so plain, and so intimately interwoven with, and so necessarily dependent on, the narration, that every reader has the same interpretation. The animals or other characters always have universally recognised qualities. The fox is cunning, the wolf cruel, the bull strong. The combination of animal behaviour and human thinking makes it possible to ridicule human weakness, without making personal accusations.

The fables in the first instance existed only in spoken versions, and for a long time were handed down by story tellers. The first European printing was in 1475, and the Fables were amongst the first books translated into English. Knowledge of the fables rapidly spread from Italy into Germany, where Martin Luther translated twenty of the fables. In 1610 a nearly complete collection was published, and in the late 1600's the French poet La Fontaine (1621-1695) translated many of Aesop's fables into a rhymed version. For many centuries Aesop's Fables have been second only to the Bible in the number of translations into different languages, and familiarity to the whole continent of Europe. A full collection of Aesop's fables together with the story of Aesop's life and the history of the fables can be found online at <http://www.aesopfables.com/>.

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***<http://www.let.kun.nl/sign-lang/echo/>***