

AviCulture - Birds In Parables

See how birds are represented in classic works of literature.

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For most of us, Aesop's fables were part of our childhood. These fables were usually about animals and were preceded or followed by a moral. The following example is entitled *The Bat, The Birds, and the Beasts*: "A great conflict was about to come off between the Birds and the Beasts. When the two armies collected together the Bat hesitated which to join. The Birds that passed his perch said:

From Aesop's fables to religious writings, birds have made appearances in works of literature throughout history to teach morals and influence culture.

'Come with us;' but he said: 'I am a Beast.' Later on, some Beasts who were passing underneath him looked up and said: 'Come with us;' but he said: 'I am a bird.' Luckily at the last moment peace was made, and no battle took place, so the Bat came to the Birds and wished to join in the rejoicings, but they all turned against him and he had to fly away. He then went to the Beasts, but soon had to beat a retreat, or else they would have torn him to pieces. 'Ah,' said the Bat, 'I see now, He that is neither one thing nor the other has no friends.'

Many of Aesop's fables are about birds alone, such as the *The Peacock and the Crane*: "A Peacock spreading its gorgeous tail mocked a Crane that passed by, ridiculing the ashen hue of its plumage and saying, 'I am robed like a king, in gold and purple and all of the colors of the rainbow: while you have not a bit of color on your wings.' 'True,' replied the Crane 'but I soar to the heights of heaven and lift my voice to the stars, while you walk below, like a cock, among the birds of the dunghill.' Moral: Fine feathers don't make fine birds."

Significance Today

Many of the morals seem inappropriate today, but fables and parables were, and are, an important part of nearly every civilization, from the Egyptians to the Hindus.

The *Panchatantra* is a five-volume set of Hindu fables written by the elderly teacher Vishnuserman. Created to aid a king in raising his children, the stories parallel many of Aesop's tales, and they too all have a moral.

The following is a fable from the *Panchatantra* entitled *The Bird with Two Necks*: "Once upon a time, there lived a special kind of bird which had two necks and shared a common stomach.

"One day, one of the heads found a jar of nectar, and on seeing this the other head also wanted to taste the nectar but the first neck refused to let it have it. Enraged, the other neck soon found a jar of poison and it consumed it. The poison reached the common stomach and both the necks perished. Moral: Sharing of a good thing with others is always good." These fables and parables, with changes to fit the local culture, are still used today.

The Bible's Old Testament contains a book of proverbs attributed to Solomon, son of David. Proverbs 30:17 shows us how proverbs and fables were used by parents to keep their children in line and used by rulers to keep the population under control. Here's what Solomon tells us about ravens and eagles: "The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it." I guess that would get you to eat all of your supper.

Cultural Connections

Legends as well as cultures overlap and influence each other. The animals within these fables and proverbs change to fit the animals found locally. You won't find tales of coyotes or bluebirds in Aesop's fables, but they, along with roadrunners and rattlesnakes, frequent the myths and legends of the Native Americans.

An example given here is from the Pima Indians of southern Arizona. *The Bluebird and the Coyote*: "The bluebird was once a very ugly color. But there was a lake where no river flowed in or out, and the bird bathed in it four times every morning for four mornings.

Every morning it sang:

“There’s a blue water, it lies there.
I went in.
I am all blue.”

On the fourth morning it shed all of its feathers and came out of the lake in its bare skin, but on the fifth morning it came out with blue feathers.

All this while Coyote had been watching the bird. He wanted to jump in and get it, but he was afraid of the water. On that fifth morning he said, ‘How is it that all of your ugly color has come out and now you are blue and gay and beautiful? You’re more beautiful than anything that flies in the air. I want to be blue too.’

Coyote was at that time a bright green. ‘I went in four times,’ said the bird, and taught Coyote the song. So Coyote went in four times, and the fifth time he came out as blue as the little bird.

That made him feel very proud. As he walked along, he looked on every side to see if anyone was noticing how fine and blue he was. He looked to see if his shadow was blue too, and so he was not watching the road. Presently he ran into a stump so hard that it threw him down in the dirt, and he became dust-colored all over. And to this day all coyotes are the color of dirt.”

No matter the culture or the continent, we see that certain birds are held in the same light by the eyes of people. The eagles are the kings, the most venerated of all the creatures of the sky. The crows and ravens are the troublemakers of Old World lore or the tricksters of the Americas. Owls exude wisdom, whether in ancient Greece or the American Southwest. These same birds are thought of in these terms even today.

There are many other groups of fables and proverbs in many other cultures. All are fun and fascinating to read.