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| Research Article

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The Social Typology of Animal Characters in French Fables

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Abstract: The fable occupies a central position in French literary tradition as a didactic and allegorical genre. Through animal characters endowed with human traits, French fabulists construct a symbolic representation of social relations, moral values, and power structures. This article explores the social typology of animal characters in French fables, focusing primarily on the Classical period. Drawing on sociocritical and structural approaches, the study analyzes how animals function as metaphors for social classes, authority, moral behavior, and social injustice. The analysis demonstrates that animal figures such as the lion, the fox, and the lamb represent stable social types, allowing fables to convey moral criticism while avoiding direct confrontation with political power. The article highlights the enduring relevance of the fable as a literary form of social reflection.

Keywords: French fables, animal symbolism, social typology, allegory, social criticism.

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Introduction

The fable is one of the oldest narrative genres in European literature, rooted in ancient oral traditions and later developed as a written literary form. In French literature, the genre reached its highest artistic and philosophical expression during the Classical age, particularly in the works of Jean de La Fontaine. French fables are characterized by brevity, narrative clarity, and a strong moral purpose.

A defining feature of the fable is anthropomorphism, which allows animals to speak and behave like humans. This narrative strategy transforms animals into symbolic figures representing human society. As scholars note, animal characters in fables embody moral qualities and social positions rather than individual psychology (Dandrey, 1996).

The aim of this article is to analyze the social typology of animal characters in French fables and to demonstrate how these figures reflect social hierarchies, power relations, and moral conflicts. By examining animal symbolism, the study reveals the sociocritical dimension of the fable genre.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of a selected corpus of French fables, primarily from the Classical tradition. The methodological framework combines literary analysis with sociocritical theory, drawing on the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault.

The analysis focuses on:

recurrent animal characters and their narrative roles;

symbolic associations between animals and social types;

moral and ideological functions of animal imagery.

A comparative approach is used to identify stable patterns in animal representation. This method allows the construction of a coherent typology that explains how animals function as social metaphors across different fables.

Results

The analysis identifies several dominant social types represented by animal characters.

Powerful animals such as the lion, the wolf, and the eagle symbolize authority and political power. The lion, often portrayed as the king of animals, represents sovereign authority and the ruling elite. His decisions are frequently arbitrary, illustrating the injustice inherent in absolute power (La Fontaine, 1991).

Cunning animals, especially the fox, represent intelligence, manipulation, and social adaptability. The fox survives not through strength but through wit, reflecting a social type associated with strategic thinking and moral ambiguity. This figure illustrates how intelligence can both challenge and reinforce social hierarchies.

Weak and innocent animals such as the lamb, the sheep, and the donkey symbolize oppressed social groups. These characters are generally honest and morally upright but lack the means to resist injustice. Their frequent victimization highlights social inequality and moral imbalance within society.

Animals occupying intermediate positions, including the dog and the monkey, represent social ambivalence. They may display loyalty, opportunism, or imitation, reflecting the complexity of social behavior and moral compromise.

Discussion

The results confirm that animal characters in French fables form a structured system of social representation. Each animal corresponds to a recognizable social role, enabling readers to interpret the moral message with clarity. According to Northrop Frye, such symbolic structures are essential to the didactic function of literary genres.

Animal allegory allows fabulists to criticize political and social structures indirectly. In historical contexts where direct criticism could provoke censorship or punishment, the use of animals provided a protective narrative distance. This allegorical strategy transforms the fable into a space of moral reflection and social critique (Barthes, 1972).

Furthermore, the social typology of animals reflects the Classical ideals of reason, order, and moral judgment. The contrast between power and weakness encourages readers to question justice, responsibility, and ethical conduct within society.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that animal characters in French fables function as symbolic representations of social types rather than simple narrative devices. Through a stable system of

animal symbolism, fabulists depict social hierarchies, power relations, and moral conflicts inherent in human society.

The social typology of animals reveals the intellectual depth of the fable genre, which combines narrative simplicity with philosophical and social complexity. By analyzing animal characters from a sociocritical perspective, this study highlights the enduring relevance of French fables as a form of moral and social discourse.

Future research may extend this analysis by comparing French fables with those of other European traditions or by examining the transformation of animal symbolism in modern literature.

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