

## Introduction

### Aesop c. 620-564 BC

Aesop was a writer from Ancient Greece, who is thought to have lived around 600 years BC, and is credited with having written a number of well-known fables. Accounts of his life often refer to him having been a slave, who gains his freedom through the strength of the advice he gives to his masters.

However, it is not certain whether he actually existed at all, or whether he is simply a legendary figure to whom a group of thematically similar folk tales were attributed. Some of the tales are known to have been told before Aesop is thought to have lived, whilst others are not recorded until many years after his supposed death.

The fables generally communicate some kind of moral message, often through the depiction of animals, who speak or otherwise take on human characteristics.

### The features of fables

#### Theme:

Although they use many of the typical themes, characters and settings of traditional stories, fables have a very specific purpose that strongly influences their content. A fable sets out to teach the reader or listener a lesson they should learn about life. The narrative drives towards the closing moral statement, the fable's theme: the early bird gets the worm, where there's a will there's a way, work hard and always plan ahead for lean times, charity is a virtue. The clear presence of a moral distinguishes fables from other folk tales.

#### Plot and structure:

Plot is overtly fictitious as the point of the story is its message, rather than an attempt to convince the reader of a real setting or characters. There is a shared understanding between storyteller and audience that the events told did not actually happen. They are used as a means to an end, a narrative metaphor for the ethical truth being promoted.

For this reason, fables do not carry any non-essential narrative baggage. There are usually few characters and often only two who are portrayed as simple stereotypes rather than multidimensional heroes or villains. Narrative structure is short (sometimes just a few sentences) and simple and there is limited use of description. Action and dialogue are used to move the story on because the all-important moral is most clearly evident in what the main characters do and say.

#### Character:

The main characters are often named in the title (*The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*, *The North Wind and the Sun*, etc) and they are also frequently animals, another subtle way of signalling the fictional, 'fabulous' nature of the story and its serious purpose. Animal characters speak and behave like human beings, allowing the storyteller to make cautionary points about human behaviour without pointing the finger at real people.

#### Style:

Many fables use the rich vocabulary, imagery and patterned language common in traditional tales but generally speaking, the shorter the fable, the more simple its use of language. In these short texts, use of vocabulary is often pared down and concise.

