

Aesop's Fables: Classical Wisdom for a Contemporary World

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Abstract

If the purpose of fables is to provide a clear moral lesson that guides a reader's understanding of the world, what relevance can these classical texts have in a contemporary world of sometimes characterised by confusion, nuance, and ambiguity?

In an undergraduate course at a university in Japan, some students might favour being offered a black-and-white issue, to be neatly concluded with a pithy maxim. However, both academic studies, and life beyond the classroom, tend to require more nuanced interpretation and tolerance of ambiguity (Hullah, 2012, p. 33). The methodology for this course design involves engaging with students' interest in the ostensibly easy-to-read fables of Aesop with the aim of activating their analytical and critical thinking skills. Through questioning notions of perspective and point-of-view, and drawing parallels with contemporary personal, social, and global issues, students are encouraged to consider issues of moral ambiguity, and how narrative tropes may be adapted or interpreted differently, depending on context and motivation. The intended outcome is that students are better equipped in "reading the world," that is, in understanding contemporary issues and evaluating nuanced perspectives with a sense of balance, logic, and empathy.

This paper provides an outline of this methodology, with examples of student activities and interpretive processes, with some examples of applications and parallels to Aesop's classic fables from contemporary media. The paper explores themes of narrative interpretation, writing contemporary experience, education, critical thinking, and narrative patterns, archetypes, and metaphors. Finally, possibilities are outlined for future research projects and further development of this approach.

Keywords: Narrative, critical thinking, education, metaphor, narratology

Introduction: Applying Narratology and Metaphor Theories to Literature in Language Teaching

The merits of introducing literary texts (broadly defined for the purpose of this paper as stories, poems, or plays) into a *language learning* curriculum, are widely acknowledged. Hedgecock and Ferris (2009), for example, cite benefits in terms of enhancing students' cultural knowledge, rich language exposure, motivation, confidence, critical thinking, and personal growth (p. 245-254) Not only are they entertaining and (usually) authentic, which provides intrinsic motivation for students to read, but they also provide varied and engaging exposure to lexicogrammatical forms, idioms, and other interesting language, which expands their linguistic awareness and productive ability (Widdowson, 1975). Narrative texts also offer patterns and layers of meaning, that invite analysis, interpretation, and discussion, thereby providing a safe conduit for students to examine their values and attitudes, and make real-world applications for fictional exemplars. In terms of formal education, narrative competence means that stories are accessible and appealing to students, and are therefore more memorable than abstract or expository texts, while also functioning "to develop more advanced critical, reflective and expressive language and literacy skills" (Hall, 2005, p. 32).

Narratology is the branch of literary semiotics that focuses on narrative and narrative structure; the way patterns, archetypes, and motifs in narrative both reflect and affect the perception of human experience. The field in its modern incarnation is understood to have begun with Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928, 1968), which sought to bypass the historical and social context of a narrative in favour of examining the functional symbolism, or the grammar of a narrative. No doubt influenced by Propp, yet not tethered so dogmatically to abstract codification, Barthes explored in his *Mythologies* (1957, 1972) the idea that cultural materials (including literary texts) consist of a range of codes and symbols that are both consciously and subconsciously interpreted by the reader, and that these codes may be used to reflect and impose cultural values on others. Focusing students' attention on how the "super-genre" of narrative functions as a "wider meaning making activity" encourages them to "develop and reflect on their own and others' [narrative] competence" (Hall, 2005, p. 32), and engage with narrative literacy as a *dynamic* process, in which socio-cognitive and linguistic abilities interplay with generic and cultural understanding (Kern, 2000).

Metaphor, the figurative use of language (or imagery) that communicates one aspect of human experience or perception in terms of another (analogous) one, is a central feature of everyday language use (Carter, 2004). In literary terms, metaphors are recognised in poetic devices, such as hyperbole and synonymy, and extended metaphorical narratives, such as allegories, and

parables, and fables. In linguistic terms, metaphor is seen as a *cognitive* or *conceptual* signifier; the principle communicative tool for “conceptualising abstract concepts like life, death, and time.” For example, “Life is a Journey.” (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. 52) In both literary and linguistic terms, metaphor is “a matter of *imaginative rationality*,” a mode of thought that frames human perception and experience, with art extending this function as a “means of creating new realities” (Lakoff & Johnson, (1980, p. 235).

Far from being merely a matter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought - all kinds of thought: thought about emotion, about society, about human character, about language, and about the nature of life and death. It is indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason. (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, xi)

Narratological analyses thus have powerful applications in terms of cognitive psychology, as well as cultural and literary theory. People understand metaphorical modes by “mentally simulating what they describe,” which both diffuses tension in ‘emotionally charged situations’, and makes “difficult concepts easier to grasp” (Geary, 2012, p182-4). Helping students to navigate cognitively and emotionally challenging themes is a crucial part of language education.

Considering the theories outlined above, the rationale behind the course *Aesop’s Fables: Classical Wisdom for a Contemporary World*, is to use accessible and recognisable literary texts to encourage students to consider these key concepts of narratology and metaphor (that is, to think critically about how our perceptions of human experience are framed through narrative and metaphor); to raise awareness of how socio-cultural influences affect both the creation, adaptation, and interpretation of narrative; and to reflect on possible parallels in personal, social, and global narratives.

Aesop’s fables are an ideal literary genre to bring into the language classroom for various reasons. For one, they are short, and ostensibly simple texts, which are appealing to students for both their accessibility and cute animal subjects. They provide simple, yet powerful, narrative paradigms for analysis, which “derive an abstract message from a concrete scene” in an accessible form for all levels of learner (Geary, 2012, p. 184). These classical parables encourage learners to engage with narrative patterns, archetypes, and metaphors, and enable them to better understand and articulate challenging “real world” concepts and ideas. As Geary (2012) explains, “[Fables] are the most compressed and concentrated form of story. They are compact metaphorical thought experiments that help us solve essential psychological and social problems in the real world” (p.

182). Moreover, they are also historically important, with powerful literary and linguistic resonance, meaning that developing a greater familiarity with these well-known cultural items will enhance students' cultural capital as well as idiomatic and thematic awareness, and analytical and critical thinking skills.

Context

“Aesop’s Fables: Classical Wisdom for a Contemporary World” was designed as a senior elective course to be taught in a Japanese international studies university. This 15-week elective course has been developed with the values of cultural awareness and global-mindedness, and the practice of learner autonomy and independence, in mind.

As detailed above, the rationale for the course follows established principles for using literature as a tool for developing language and communication skills, as well as expanding cultural awareness and critical thinking skills. It explores key concepts of narratology and metaphor theory, and demonstrates how simple, yet iconic, texts such as Aesop’s fables can provide an accessible and thought-provoking medium for students to analyse, reflect, and express their thoughts on a range of issues.

Theoretical Underpinning for “Aesop’s Fables: Classical Wisdom for a Contemporary World”

Carter and Long (1991) suggest that there are three main models for incorporating literature into the classroom: cultural, language, and personal growth. The cultural model approaches the literary text as a final product of a particular cultural moment or context, and is analysed in order to gain insights into the culture and/or author. The language model is more learner-centred, with students participating in stylistic analysis of lexico-grammatical features and their function within the text. The personal growth model encourages students to engage with the themes of a text in terms of their own opinions, feelings, and personal experiences. Aesop’s fables would certainly be compatible literary texts for each of these teaching models.

The cultural model addresses the fables as historical artefacts from ancient Greece (or possibly Mesopotamia), offering potential to explore modes of thinking and expression prevalent in the classical world, including the functions of oral narrative and rhetorical tradition in classical society, and the use of narrative as a medium for social and political commentary. Students could also develop a critical approach to sources, and analyse theories of authorship and authority by looking into the speculative theories about the identity of Aesop and the origin of the fables.

The language model is also applicable to Aesop’s fables, as even short narratives can be exploited to develop student’s genre awareness, literacy and narrative competency, fluency, and lexico-grammatical skills. Receptive and productive activities connected to the structure, themes, and language content (notably, vocabulary, idioms, and metaphorical language) of the fables would provide valuable practice of the four key language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening (See Table 1, below, for further details of language skills practice activities).

Table 1. *Skills Practice Activities*

Skill	Activities
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Aesop’s Fables</i> ● Newspaper articles ● Movie posters/ reviews ● Modern re-imaginings, picture book versions (E.g., Eric Carle’s <i>Treasury</i>), illustrations, poetry, and song lyrics
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Weekly journal and reflection ● Portfolio of written tasks ● Movie poster/ trailer blurb ● Short film script ● Cartoons/ storyboards
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Audio versions of the fables (e.g., narrated by Richard Briers on BBC School Radio) ● Watching video clips (news articles, movie trailers/ clips, short films) ● Songs relating to the weeks’ theme ● True life stories (video/ audio files on Storycorps.com)
Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Extended interactions on contemporary news stories ● Discussions/ debates on key themes and issues ● Collaborative problem-solving projects ● Narration/ performance of short film scripts

The personal growth model is “particularly suited to the high school and undergraduate classroom” (Bibby and McIlroy, 2013, p.20), and this methodology is most suited to the rationale (i.e., of narrative and metaphor theories regarding the conceptual framing of perception) and curriculum goals (intercultural awareness, autonomy, and criticality) of the course. These “compact metaphorical thought experiments” (Geary, 2012, p. 182) are ideally suited to an exploration of abstract concepts and complex personal, social, and global issues. Using these elemental chunks of literature in the classroom provides a stimulus for students to interpret, reflect on, and apply narrative and metaphorical themes to their own perceptions of the world. It serves to heighten

students' awareness of issues of perception and communication, to share and express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, with empathy and a greater tolerance of ambiguity.

While the “Aesop’s Fables: Classical Wisdom for a Contemporary World” course incorporates elements of the cultural and language models, the main model that the course follows is that of personal growth. Specific growth-based activities were tailored to the thematic focus of each class (as exemplified in the next section), while the following set of key generic interpretive discussion questions was devised to offer a consistent strand of analysis and reflection throughout the course:

- Do you agree with the message of the fable? Why?
- What is the main theme or moral of the fable?
- How does the fable connect with this week’s theme?
- How does the fable connect with a) personal, b) social, and c) global issues?
- If you were adapting this fable for a contemporary audience, what ideas would you focus on?

Course Outline

The following is the outline for a 30-hour course, meeting 90 minutes twice per week over the course of a 15-week semester.

The course starts with a general introduction and background to Aesop’s fables, including the historical context of the classical world, oral traditions, and issues of authorship. Students are made aware of how to access different versions of the fables using the *Fables of Aesop* website (Simondi, 2014, 2017) and practice how to access and read fables to get a general understanding of the narrative rather than becoming fixated on linguistic details. Since the texts are all adaptations and translations, there may be interesting language features to explore, but it is rarely worthy of a deep stylistic analysis in terms of author motivation or narrative effect. On the other hand, many fables are the source of noteworthy idiomatic or metaphorical and idiomatic language, which is certainly worth focusing on. During this introductory period, students also become familiar with common literary devices and narrative patterns, as well as distinguishing features of fables, including anthropomorphism, symbolism, and moral messages.

Once the course is underway, students examine themes of various Aesop’s classic fables from the perspective of contemporary experience. Each week, a variety of media (e.g., written text, video adaptations, cartoons, etc.) is used to explore one fable, or a group of fables connected by a common theme (see Table 2, below, for examples). Emphasis is placed on making direct connection between the moral and life lessons of Aesop’s fables, and modern global, social, and personal

issues, thereby providing a classical literary stimulus for topical discussions relevant to students' lives and interests.

Table 2. *Examples of Fables and Weekly Themes*

Fables	Themes
<i>The Shepherd's Boy (& 6 Wolf Fables)</i>	Literary devices: non-human subjects Deception and reputation
<i>The Crow and the Pitcher</i>	Self-reflection and Goal-setting Human determination and success
<i>The Dog and His Reflection & The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs</i>	Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (need vs. want) Consumer culture & environmental damage
<i>The Fox and the Grapes & The Tortoise and the Hare</i>	Sportsmanship Cognitive dissonance
<i>Town Mouse and Country Mouse & Wolf and Dog</i>	Urban vs. rural life Concepts of freedom
<i>The Young Mouse, the Cock, and the Cat & The Ass in the Lion's Skin & The Jackdaw and the Peacock Feather</i>	False impressions Misleading messages, trickery and deception

Note. As the course progresses, themes are less proscribed and students are encouraged to provide their own analogies and choose their own fables to interpret.

Through a discussion of the themes and moral lessons as presented in the fables, students have opportunities to gain insight into human nature and behavioural cause and effect, and explore issues of interpretation, application, and adaptation. They are encouraged to develop their critical thinking skills and consider a number of challenging ethical questions relating to contemporary news stories, modern narratives, art, music, etc, and have plenty of opportunities to express their ideas and opinions in creative and collaborative in-class projects, written analyses, and reflections. An example of how different activities and media are used to explore a weekly theme is outlined in the next section.

Toward the start of the course the discussion of themes is carefully scaffolded, with fables and supporting contemporary texts provided by the teacher. As the semester progresses, however, students are encouraged to be more independent in their criticality, with more ambiguous themes presented by the teacher, or with students analysing their own selection of fables to present for discussion.

The following section provides an example of a weekly theme from the early stages of the course, in which the thematic connections between a group of fables and contemporary issues is explicitly scaffolded by the teacher.

Two-class Lesson Outline: In the Company of Wolves

Class 1

The objective of this class is to introduce students to some common generic features of fables, as well as practice narrative competencies (reading and storytelling skills), and reflective and critical interpretation.

1. *Literary Devices: Non-human Subjects*. Introduce students to the concepts of anthropomorphism, personification, and animal symbolism using non-literary examples (e.g., cartoons, illustrations, and logos), encouraging them to discuss their different uses and communicative functions, and think of iconic examples from culture and media.
2. *In the Company of Wolves*. Activate schemata about wolves (in real life, and in culture). Discuss any common characteristics or symbolism connected to wolves, and possible differences between cultures.
3. *Jigsaw Reading: Six Fables* (“The Wolf and the Lamb,” “The Wolf and the Crane,” “The Wolf Grown Old,” “The Wolf and the Lion,” “The Wolf and the Lion,” “The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing”)
 - a. *Reading*. In small groups, students are designated a fable which they read get a general, but confident, understanding of the basic narrative. Linguistic details are not the main focus here, but group members may help each other or ask the teacher for help with any issues of comprehension. Students then decide on an appropriate moral message or lesson according to their own interpretation of the narrative. While fable texts usually have morals attached (and these can be provided for students’ interest later on, if desired), the purpose of this activity is for students to engage with their own interpretation. There are no right answers here.
 - b. *Storytelling*. Students re-group and share their fables with classmates who looked at other fables. This enables students to gain a general understanding of several fables through listening, in addition to the one they have read, as well as practicing oral storytelling skills.
 - c. *Discussion*. Students answer the following questions to engage in a comparative, reflective, and critical discussion on the six fables:
 - Which of the fables do you like the most?
 - Do you agree or disagree with the morals of today’s fables?

- Are any of the fables relevant to your personal life? How?
- Do any of the fables have wider social or global relevance? How?

4. *Homework.* Students are requested to read (any version of) “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” to make sure they are familiar with the narrative before the next class.

Class 2

The objective of this class is to practice narrative competencies, including understanding and re-telling stories, and engaging in interpretive and reflective analysis of a narrative, as well as raising students awareness of issues of perspective, and the variety of ways a narrative may be applied to different contemporary contexts.

1. *Review of fables from previous class.* This is to practice oral storytelling skills, as well as to refresh students’ memories of the themes and issues that have already been discussed.
2. *The Boy Who Cried Wolf.* Students tell this fable together, to make sure they all have the same general understanding of the narrative.
3. *The Boy Who Cried Wolf: Discussion.* This time, the discussion questions encourage a deeper analysis of this individual fable. Notably, the third question, asks students to engage in a personal and emotional interpretation of the narrative content, and encourages them to look at the narrative from different perspectives. The final two questions ask students to start drawing direct parallels between the themes of the narrative and ‘real world’ issues:
 - What is the main theme or moral of the fable?
 - Do you agree with the message of the fable? Why?
 - How do you think the Boy feels at the end of the story? What about the townspeople?
 - How does the fable connect with a) personal, b) social, and c) global issues?
 - If you were adapting this fable for a contemporary audience, what ideas would you focus on?
4. *Fables in Contemporary Culture: Two Songs.* Students look at two contemporary songs and discuss how they connect with the themes of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” For example, the first song, by the UK artist Passenger, seems to focus on themes of reputation, disappointment, and lost opportunity. The second song, by the Japanese artist, sasakure.UK, has a more ambiguous message. In this activity, some students drew parallels with political cover-ups and ineffective safety warnings in connection to natural disasters, while other groups applied other interpretations. It should be noted that as long as students can explain how they are exploring the themes of the fable, there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. In

the lesson, students have access to the full song, video, and complete lyrics. Extracts of the song lyrics are provided below.

Well, I am the shepherd's only son
And I know what a joke I've become
I have an honest heart but I have lies on my tongue
I don't know how it started or where it came from
And you have no reason and I have no proof
But this time I swear, I'm telling the truth
(Passenger (2017) "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." [Lyrics retrieved from genius.com])

My friend's friend was eaten! Oh what imprudence, imprudence.
"There will be no effect immediately, I heard" such ambiguity, mister big-wig.
With an iron collar put around my neck I can't move at all.
So I snarled at this irresponsible world in a loud voice. "It's a lie!" [...]
"The wolf is coming" be careful or we'll be eaten; the sheep, me, you, this town.
"The wolf is coming" I need to say, before the lie denies the lie
before the lie denies the lie,

友達の友達が食べられた! 不謹慎だ、不謹慎だって
「ただちに影響は無いそうですよ」 あいまいね、偉いひと。
鉄の首輪かけられた僕は 身動きが、とれないから
いいかげんな世界に大声で噛み付いた。"ウソだ!"って。 [...]
『オオカミがくるよ』 食べられちゃうぞ 羊も僕も君も街も
『オオカミがくるよ』 言わなくちゃ ウソがウソを 拒む前に 前に
(sasakure.UK (2012). "A Soliloquy of The Boy who Cried Wolf." [Lyrics and
English translation retrieved from Chris & Catherine (The Twin Sisters) (2013)])

5. *Fables in the News*. Students look at two examples of articles from contemporary news media (below), which draw direct parallels with current events and the parable. The first example "Don't Cry Wolf," from *Greytown Gazette*, uses the metaphor to discuss issues of internet hoaxes causing confusion over extreme weather warnings. The second, "Trump: The Man Who Cried Wolf" (Rogan, 2017) from the *Washington Examiner*, uses the metaphor to explore US President Donald Trump's use of social media, and how the of hyperbolic language in his tweets undermines his credibility as a purveyor of political commentary. Students are not required to read these articles. Rather, the teacher uses screenshots of the headlines (see Fig. 1) as examples to highlight how the themes and language of fables become idiomatic in a range of (non-fictional) narratives.

Don't cry wolf!
2017-09-27 06:00

Greytown GAZETTE

THERE appears to be an increasing number of small-minded geeks around who think that promoting fake news on social media is clever — it's actually anything but.

Two instances in the last week with Hurricane Irma and Maria battering and destroying lives, properties and just about everything in sight, the message was that Hurricane Sifiso, category three, was about to hit Durban and KZN and would be around for about three days.

A couple hours later — came a second message that Hurricane Sifiso was a hoax.

Last Tuesday a warning issued by a Warrant Officer Manilal that the N3 from Hilton off-ramp to the mall would be closed between 8am and 12pm as they were laying cables on both sides of the road — obviously there would be traffic chaos. This was circulated on several groups with the claim that it was "authentic".

Several hours later it was broadcast that this again was a hoax.

Obviously these tiny-minded people do not know Aesop's Fable of "the boy who cried wolf", a young shepherd was bored watching the sheep so cried out "wolf, wolf, the wolf is chasing the sheep".

The villagers all ran up the hill to help — he laughed at them when they found no wolf. Later he cried out "wolf" again and the villagers rushed to save their sheep, he was laughing at them as there was no wolf.

A bit later, the young shepherd saw a real wolf. He sprang to his feet and shouted "wolf, wolf," but this time no one came. When he returned to the village in tears, asking why they had not answered his call — the villagers said "nobody believes a liar ... even when he is telling the truth".

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Monday, December 11, 2017

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OPINION

Trump: The man who cried wolf

by Tom Rogan | Jul 12, 2017, 10:38 AM



President Trump was back on Twitter early this morning, complaining about the treatment of his son Donald Trump Jr. (AP Photo/Matt Bourke)

Figure 1. Fables in the News

6. *In the Company of Wolves: Idioms.* Students discuss the meanings of some common English wolf idioms (provided by the teacher, in this instance), some of which come directly from the Aesop's fables they have looked at during the week's classes. At this stage in the week, students should be able to recognise the references and common themes, and give real life examples of when these idioms could be used:

- to keep the wolf from the door
- to keep the wolves at bay
- a lone wolf
- to throw (someone) to the wolves
- to wolf down (something)
- a wolf in sheep's clothing
- to cry wolf

Conclusion

The first version of this course is currently coming to an end, and more evaluative responses and feedback will be gathered from students at the end. Observations of student participation in class and written reflections have been largely positive.

From student reflections at the start of the semester, it was clear that although some students said that they wanted to debate or discuss their ideas, many students were attracted to the course because they liked fairy tales, and were looking forward to enjoying stories that they believed would be accessible. There was therefore potential for some disappointment as the course

progressed, when the focus on interpretation, reflection, and contemporary issues began to occupy more class time, with the fables used as a thematic frame for “big ideas.” However, attendance was strong, and participation in interpretive activities and discussions was active and engaged. Students were increasingly confident and competent in drawing parallels to the fables from their own lives or observations of contemporary issues. Their “real life” analogies have been creative and perceptive, and participation in class has been open and supportive.

In the next iteration of the course, more time will be taken early on to encourage a tolerance for ambiguity, because once students realised that there was not one specific parallel to be drawn, or even one specific ‘moral’ message to be gleaned from any given fable, they were able to apply themselves to analysing the narratives with creativity, insight, and empathy. This is the ideal climate for students to engage in critical thinking, and such an openness to interpretation ought to be established and nurtured from the outset.

There are a number of possibilities for further developing the ideas and materials of this course in the future. For example, a range of classroom materials based on the content of the course could be published, to make the fables even more accessible to a wider range of students. Materials could be developed for a whole course, guiding students from scaffolded analysis to autonomous interpretation of narrative themes and patterns, or else as stand-alone lessons to be integrated into a wider curriculum.

Research might involve conducting pre- and post-course tests and surveys, to assess students’ awareness of both literary and conceptual metaphors. There is also scope for more rigorous analysis of Aesop’s fables in terms of literary semiotics and narrative patterning, including a mapping of key metaphoric patterns, archetypes and animal symbolism. In addition, corpus analysis could be undertaken as an independent research project, to look into references to fables (i.e., keywords) in news media, providing more quantifiable data evidence of the affective and effective influence of Aesop in contemporary discourse.

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