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THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVE ELEMENT IN NEOCLASSICAL FABLE

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In grateful memory of my spiritual guide, professor Henryk Zbierski.

1. Introduction

The fable, originating in the classical period, in the European literature of modern times became fully canonized as a genre only in the age of Neoclassicism. Because of their relatively simple structure and moralizing character, fables gained enormous popularity both as a means of education by entertainment, and as convenient disguise for manifestations of political or social convictions, which the fabulists of the Age of Reason frequently conveyed in their texts.

On the one hand, the conventional character of the fables, their simplicity and brevity, imposed formal constraints on the writers. On the other hand, however, the same qualities of the genre precluded any narrative structure other than the manifestation of the relationships between actors in the presented world in terms of basic oppositions, thus making the message of the text easily decipherable for the readers. The idea of the basic oppositions manifesting themselves at the surface level of the text in various ways is the leit-motif of the present paper, in which we will attempt to propose a simple, polar model of a text grammar on the basis of the graceful material of John Gay's little masterpieces.

Before we proceed to the theoretical part of this paper, let us first make some observations concerning the history of the genre in England, and the role John Gay played within that history.

2. Neoclassical fable in England

Strangely enough, the fable, although very popular in the Europe of Neoclassicism, in England did not become a literary form in which many poets would take interest. In fact, John Gay did not have many opportunities to learn the difficult art of writing fables from the English authors, although he may have read Dryden's *Fables*

Ancient and Modern and his verse translations of Homer, Ovid and Boccaccio. Before Dryden, however, fables were not unknown to English literature.

The author who introduced this form to the literary tradition of Britain was John Ogilby (1600-1670). His translation of Aesop's fables was a step of significant consequences as far as the development of this tradition was concerned. Nevertheless, although Ogilbys contribution towards the canonization of the genre was probably decisive, he was not the first poet to write fables of the Aesopean type in English. The beginnings of this form in the English literature date back to the turn of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Chaucerian *Parliament of Fowles*, although not an example of an Aesopean fable, already employs the Aesopean strategy of ascribing human features to various species of birds. Drabble (1985:335) mentions that Chaucer and Henryson imitated Aesops fables, which supposedly were well known at their times.

It is rather difficult to establish to what degree Gay's *Fables* were inspired by the works of the authors mentioned above, but is seems reasonable to suspect that the inspiration to write them came mainly from the other side of the English Channel, from the land of the genuine master of the literary fable: Jean La Fontaine.[1] In 1668 La Fontaine — an extraordinarily talented writer, and in the later period a member of the famous French Academy — publishes the first volume of his *Fables*. Soon afterwards came the subsequent volumes; their fame immediately spread all over Europe, where they enjoyed enormous applause and found numerous enthusiasts. The most famous of them were G. E. Lessing in Germany, Krylov in Russia, and, in the Polish literary tradition, Z. Niemirycz, I. Krasicki and S. Trembecki.[2] It is natural that these fables were also known in the England of the Age of Reason.

There are two arguments that seem to support the thesis of La Fontaine's influence on Gay's *Fables*. Firstly, their structure is almost identical to the structure of La Fontaine's fables,[3] and secondly, the issues that Gay touches upon largely overlap with the moral problems discussed in the fables by the master from the Continent. Also, it is worth adding that La Fontaine's later fables become more politically oriented, which also holds true in the case of John Gay's fables collected in the second volume. Yet, there is no certainty whether the change in the character of his fables was due to the influence of the great Frenchman; the similarity could be purely coincidental, or merely result from the logical evolution.

Via La Fontaine, John Gay as a fabulist is the follower of the ancient tradition. In the introduction (*Preface*) to his *Fables* (1668) Jean La Fontaine writes:

[1] Margaret Drabble (1985: 335) mentiones that "...La Fontaine, the greatest of modern fable writers, was imitated by Gay."

[2] Aesop's Fables were translated into Polish by Biernat z Lublina in the beginning of the 16th century. From that moment, the fable became one of the most popular satirical and educational genres in Poland. Most of the Polish poets of Renaissance, Baroque and particularly of Neoclassicism wrote fables.

[3] Cf. section 3 of the present paper.

> *...Aristote n'admet dans la fable que les animaux; il en exclut les hommes et les plantes. Cette règle est moins de nécessité que de bien séance, puisque ni Ésope, ni Phèdre, ni aucun des fabulistes, ne l'a gardeé; tout au contraire de la moralité, dont aucun ne se dispense. Que s'il m'est arrivé de le faire, ce n'a été que dans les endroits où elle n'a pu entrer avec grâce, et où il est aisé au lecteur de la suppléer. On ne considère en France que ce qui plait: c'est la grande règle, et pour ainsi dire la seule. Je n'ai donc pas cru que ce fût un crime de passer pardessus les anciennes coutumes, lorsque je ne pouvais les mettre en usage sans leur faire tort. Du temps d'Ésope, la fable était contée simplement, la moralité séparée, et toujours ensuite. Phèdre est venu, qui ne s'est pas assujetti à cet ordre: il embellit la narration et transporte quelquefois la moralit de la fin au commencement.*
>
> (La Fontaine 1965)

> [In the fable Aristotle allows animals only; he excludes people and plants. This principle seems to be dictated to a greater extent by the requirements of the particular character of his fables than by any objective necessity, especially that neither Aesop, nor Phaedrus, nor any of the fabulists to follow would observe it. The case is converse with the moral: all the fabulists include it. Myself, I sometimes disregard the moral, but only in such places where it could not be introduced without turning a graceful harmony of a passage into ruin, or where the reader may easily deduce it on his own. The French respect only what they please; this is the great rule and, one could say, the only one. Therefore, I do not believe that it is a crime to leave an ancient custom aside whenever observing it could prove detrimental to this very custom. During the times of Aesop the fable would be narrated in a simple manner; the moral was separate and always placed at the end of the story. Then came Phaedrus, who would not follow these rules: he embellished the narration and, now and again, he would shift the moral from the end to the beginning of the fable.][4]

Gay basically leaves the structure of the fable unchanged: like Phaedrus, he places the *moral*, being at the same time an introduction *of* the problem he intends to discuss, at the beginning. Then he inserts his *commentary*, being the introduction *to* the problem, or, in other words, a subject matter presentation. Later comes *fable proper*: the narrative illustration of the issue, and finally comes the *point*,[5] which either is a part of the fable proper, or is included in the author's commentary

[4] Translation mine (P. J.)

[5] The very term point is rather vague; here it is used in the sense of a witty, somewhat surprising final part of the fable, a longish punch-line.

at the end of the whole text. Each of the fables includes a title, an obligatory element, which in fact is the title of the fable proper.

Let us then concentrate on the major constituents of the fable.

3. Elements of the fable

3.1. Moral

Moral is an indispensable element of Gay's fables. Whenever it is present as a separate part of the text, it always comes in the form of a *promythion*. In the fables in which the moral is not an independent element it is included within the fable proper. In the majority of cases John Gay makes use of a promythion to present the more complex ethical issues. The moral is a preceptorial voice, a statement of evaluative power and of mentorial function. It is usually expressed on the form of a proverb or as a direct advice to be followed. Particularly in the second volume of the *Fables* the promythion coalesces with the author's commentary, thus becoming the manifestation of Gay's views. Since morals are characteristic for their brevity (which is an important factor facilitating their perception), it is possible to quote some of them as examples:[6]

(a) Who friendship with a knave hath made,
Is judg'd a partner in the trade ...

(Fable XXIII, Vol. I)

(b) Lest men suspect your tale untrue
Keep probability in view.

(Fable XVIII, Vol. I.)

(c) I grant corruption sways mankind;
That int'rest, too, perverts the mind;
That bribes have blinded common sense,
Foil'd reason, truth and eloquence;
I grant you, too, our present crimes
Can equal those of former times.

(Fable IX, Vol. II.)

3.2. Commentary

The author's commentary is the voice of his personal experience and the manifestation of his views. The majority of Gay's fables include the commentary. Nevertheless, in a number of them, especially in the fables in which the moral issue at hand is clearly understandable, the moral alone functions as a commentary.[7] The commentaries are often illustrated with examples or proverbs, and their style always meets the requirements of *decorum* and poetic diction. In this element of a fable, Gay often juggles with sophisticated metaphors, creates parabolic sentences and draws surprising parallels. Frequently, he utilizes these tropes in order to obtain the effect of brevity, which does not contradict his being convincing. In the second volume of the *Fables*, the commentaries often turn into political and sociological treatises (often moralizing in character); the side effect of such prolonging of the commentaries is that the fables lose their compactness, and their reception is more difficult. The moment the reader reaches the fable proper is significantly deferred, which results in the decrease of his/her attention.[8] In some of the fables there occurs an important element such as a *dedication*, like the one that Gay included in the introductory fable of the first volume of his *Fables:*

(d) Accept, young Prince the moral lay,
and in these tales mankind survey;
with early virtues plant your breast,
the specious art of vice detest.

Usually, the presence of a dedication influences the shape of the author's commentary: it assumes the form of a mentorial speech given to the addressee of the fable. In this type of commentary, Gay always uses the form of the second person (either singular or plural).

3.3. Fable proper

The fable proper is the central part of the fable's structure. It is a short narrative with a vivid plot and, out of necessity, limited imagery. The plot mentioned always contains a conflict of characters or ideas. Therefore the fable proper serves as an illustration of the problem the whole fable discusses. Hence it is also the most suggestive part of the fable, and for that reason the message conveyed by it can immediately be understood. La Fontaine says:

> *Dites à un enfant que Crassus, allant contre les Parthes, s'engagea dans leur pays sans considerér comment il en sortirait; que cela le fit périr, lui et son armée, quelque effort qu'il fit pour se retirer. Dites au même enfant que le renard et le bouc descendirent au fond d'un puits pour y éteindre leur soif; que le renard en sortit s'etant servi des épaules et des cornes de son camarade comme d'une èchelle; au contraire, le bouc y demeura pour n'avoir pas eu tant de prévoyance; et par conséquent il faut considérer en toute chose la fin. Je demande lequel de ces deux exemples fera le plus d'impression sur cet enfant. Ne s'arrêtera-t-il pas au dernier, comme plus conforme et moins disproportionn que l'autre à la petitesse de son esprit?*
>
> (La Fontaine 1965)

[Tell a child that Crassus, while marching against the Parthians, ventured deep in their country without considering ways of re-

[6] All quotes from John Gay's Fables come from Gay (1808).

[7] Cf. Fable L in the mentioned edition.

8 Cf. Fable VI.

> treat, and that as a result of it both himself and his army perished in spite of all their efforts made in order to withdraw. Tell the same child that a fox and a goat descended to the bottom of a well in order to quench their thirst, that the fox made his way back to the surface using his companions back and horns instead of a ladder, and conversely, that the goat, incapable of anticipating possible consequences of his actions, was left in the well. The conclusion that follows is obvious: *look before you leap,* or in other words *he that not looks before, finds himself behind.* Let me then ask: which of the two examples will make a greater impression on the child? Will the child not remember the second one better as more conforming and less disproportionate with regard to the tininess of his mind?][9]

The fable proper is not only supposed to illustrate, but also to prove the point the author makes in the promythion, or else to lead directly to the conclusions to be drawn in the *epimythion*, or in other words, to the final moral. The fable proper usually ends in a witty point, which is also the solution of its plot.

Having made the above observations concerning the surface structure of the fable proper, we can now proceed to the questions concerning its deep level.

4. The deep level contrast of the fable proper

Vladimir Propp in his pioneering work *The Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 1976) presented a new approach to the study of the plot. His methodology was then taken up by numerous scholars, who tried, and are still trying to create a generative model for all narrative texts. Propp's research material consisted of several hundred Russian folktales, collected and systematized by a Finnish ethnologist Matti Arne. Propp classed the folktales together on the basis of their common structure, and after profound analysis he arrived at a model of text grammar, and postulated the existence of a deep structure of the narrative text, thus arriving at a significant generalization concerning its very nature. He suggested that the plots of the tales have a common underlying structure, which consists of the elements of twofold type: *functions* and *roles*. Propp distinguished 31 functions and 7 roles.[10] A. J. Greimas, one of the followers of Vladimir Propp, reduced the number of roles to six and eliminated the notion of function, instead introducing the notion of *distinctive structures* (*syntagmes*) (Greimas 1970, 1983).[11] We will not discuss his model here in any further detail; we will, however, adapt some of the terms proposed by the mentioned authors in our polar model of the underlying structure of the narrative text within the fable proper.

The highly conventional structure of the Aesopean type of literary fable largely

[9] Translation mine (P.J.)

[10] Cf: Culler (1975: 205 ff) and Hawkes (1977: 123 ff).

[11] Cf. also: Grzegorczyk 1989.

facilitates our task. It is easily observable that this type of the fable presents certain ideas by means of *contrasting* opposite, *polar* concepts. If we assume that the opposites are burdened with certain roles, the number of the roles in question is automatically limited to two.

Let us assume the following terms to mark each of the deep level roles in our model:

a) *positive actant* (positive concepts, such as good(-ness), wisdom)
b) *negative actant* (negative concepts, such as evil, stupidity)

Hence, on the surface level we will distinguish *the positive actor* and *the negative actor*. To make the generalization significant, the collective actor will be treated here as the representation of a single actant at the deep level.

The analysis of John Gay, I. Krasicki, S. Trembecki, and Jean La Fontaine suggests a conclusion that there is only one distinctive structure determining the relations between the actants in the deep structure of the plot of the fable proper. To mark this structure, let us assume a working term of a *clash*. By clash we will henceforth understand a contrast in which the negative actant is opposed to the positive actant. The *clashed* ideas do not necessarily have to overlap with those presented in the moral; they can as well serve as a tool, thanks to which a surface representation *leading* to the moral can be generated.

On the surface level, the clash may be realized in four ways:

a) *Positive Actor: Negative Actor opposition* (+\–)
b) *Implied Positive Actor: Negative Actor opposition* (+\–)
c) *Neutral Actor: Positive Actor opposition* (0\+)
d) *Negative Actor: Negative Actor opposition* (–\–)

Let me illustrate the instances with examples. Situation (a) occurs in fables in which both positive and negative characters are present in the text of their respective fables proper. The second instance is more complex, because it occurs in fables in which the positive actor does not exist overtly in the text, but is implied by the elements preceding or following the fable proper. The implied positive actor is usually an idea (or a set of ideas) opposite to the concept represented by the negative actor (the non-existence of the positive counterpart of the negative actor can be regarded as a *minus-device*). The contrast in this case is established between the negative and positive actants, according to the model.

The next instance refers to the fables in which the actors presented do not stand at opposite poles. Consequently, in such cases the clash does not produce very dramatic results at the surface level, since the message is conveyed by means of an arbitrary statement of one actor only, whereas the function of the other one(s) is to elicit this statement.

The last example refers only to the more complex fables, which employ more then one illustrative opposition. Such oppositions are then contrasted with any of the remaining clash realizations, i.e. (a), (b) or (c). There usually occurs some element common to the contrasted clash realizations; this element constitutes the point of reference of the mentioned contrast.

The model suggested above seems to function well for the whole canon of the literary fables of the Aesopean type, accounting for a number of possible surface representations of the plot of the fable proper. In the next chapter we will try to carry out exemplary analyses of selected narratives of John Gays fables.

5. Exemplary analyses

5. 1. *The Shepherd and the Philosopher*

The very title of this fable already suggests the surface level opposition. However, as the story develops, it turns out that the title is an artistic device especially tailored to mislead the reader and thus to increase the fable's impact. Evidently, the contrast established at the deep level should be classified as belonging to the third category, i.e., positive actor: neutral actor opposition (+/0). In fact the Shepherd, denoting Experience, is not *opposed* to the Philosopher (Scholarship), since each of them is an adherent of certain views which are complementary rather than contradictory in character. In this case the Philosopher is the actor to elicit the Shepherd's monologue, which leads directly to the moral.

Schematically, the deep level contrast and its surface realization can be presented in the following way:

Shepherd	:	Philosopher
+	:	0

5. 2. Fable I. *The Lion, The Tiger and the Traveller*

In this case we have the negative: positive contrast. The Lion, being a tyrant, represents cruelty and boastfulness; the Traveller, on the other hand, is an idealist trying to convince his interlocutor about the necessity of merciful and caring rule, thus representing a complex of features, such as mellowness, wisdom and justice. The schematic representation of the fable would be the following:

Lion	:	Traveller
–	:	+

5. 3. Fable XIV. *The Monkey Who Had Seen the World*

Corrupted people teach a stupid monkey their courtly customs with all their infamous implications. The latter, unable to distinguish good from evil, introduces what he managed to learn to his former environment: a group of wild monkeys. The group is equally uncritical about novelties as he is himself; he presents the human customs as an unquestionable value, necessary to accept in order to accomplish progress in civilization.

Here we face a contrast between an implied positive actor and a negative actor. The clash results from the opposition of stupidity and non-criticism against wisdom and critical thinking. The latter elements are not present in the text of the fable proper, but are implied by the use of such negative concepts as "malice", "envy", "mischief", etc., and obviously, by the epimythion following. It is worth noting that the maverick strategy employed by the author makes the message very clear and reinforces it by inducing readers' surprise and the feeling of embarrassment they experience at the straightforward comparison of people and monkeys.

monkeys	:	implied positive actor
–	:	+

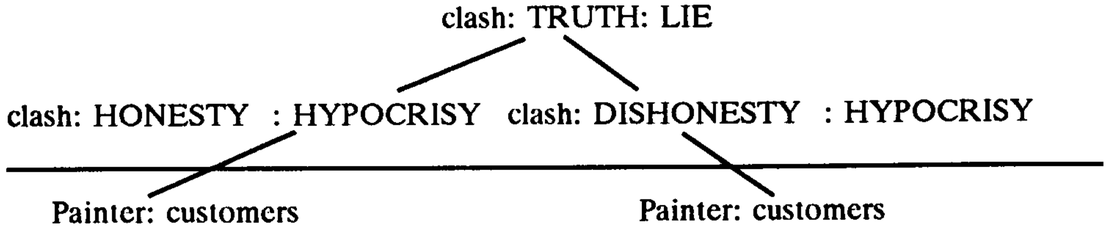
5. 4. Fable XVII. *The Shepherd's Dog and the Wolf*

In this fable the Wolf, usually associated with evil, is presented as a positive character, since he is "fierce and bold "with hunger, and thus justified in his actions. The Dog, from the human perspective serving "the right cause, is shown in a neutral light. The latter's task is to elicit the Wolf's monologue, which at the same time serves as the moral of the fable. Thus at the deep level we are dealing with the clash of "necessity of survival (Wolf) and the "lack of understanding of others necessity of survival (Dog). The moral, however, refers to the concepts of the necessary vs. intended evil, and openness vs. pretending. It is not based on the deep structure of the fable proper, but rather on the deep level of the Wolf's monologue (being another text within the text under discussion). The schematic illustration of this type of contract would be the following:

Dog	:	Wolf
0	:	+

5. 5. Fable XVIII. *The Painter Who Pleased Nobody and Everybody*

The very title of this fable contains a contradiction: pleasing nobody and everybody at the same time seems to be an impossibility. In fact, the Painter first "pleases nobody", and only later he finds a way to please everyone. This fable is a very specific one, since its deep structure consists of two sub-levels:



As it is marked on the diagram, the fable proper falls into two parts. The first one is the story of the Painter, who, painting his pictures with perfect fidelity never pleased his customers, and, as a consequence, lost them. In the second part, the Painter decides to render on canvas unfaithful images of his customers and improve them greatly, thus to please their vanity. As a result, the two sub-levels of the deep structure consist of two different types of contracts:

Painter	:	customers	and	Painter	:	customers
+	:	–		–	:	–

The above types of contrast result respectively from positive actor: negative actor opposition, and negative actor: negative actor opposition. We can also observe an element being a common point of reference in both constituent stories of the fable proper, namely the customers, denoting hypocrisy in both cases. If we neglect the point of reference, we deal with a schematic "proto-opposition, i.e., Truth: Lie (+/–), which is represented on the surface level by the Painter in the first, idealistic period, and the Painter, who has changed his idealistic views. To summarize this fable, let me present the schematic picture of the deep level contrast:

Painter	:	Painter
+	:	–

5. 6. Fable XXIII. *The Old Woman and Her Cats*

The deep structure of this fable, unlike in the case of the previous one, is quite schematic; i.e., here we have a positive vs. negative (+/–) opposition on the surface, and a clash between Bad Fame and Good Fame at the deep level. The Old Woman is the negative actor, whereas Cats play the opposite role of a collective positive actor. The bad fame of the Old Woman is unjustly transferred upon the innocent animals, who suffer consequences of this fact.

The schematic diagram is the following:

The Old Woman	:	The Cats
–	:	+

5. 7. Fable XL. *The Two Monkeys*

Again, the reader deals with Gay's maverick presentation of the world: the fabulist confronts monkeys and people, but in this case monkeys, however traditionally associated with stupidity, turn out to be wiser than people, because they do not try to imitate human customs. The deep level clash consists then in the juxtaposition of the concept of naturalness and the concept of unnaturalness. On the surface

level we are presented a negative: positive opposition of people and monkeys, appearing as negative and positive actors (respectively).

Monkeys	:	People
+	:	–

The effect of the fable is reinforced by the inversion of the roles (monkeys as spectators, people as performers in the show) and by direct comparison of men to apes ("Great Apes of reason"), which immediately reminds the reader that a common term for the 18th century was the Age of Reason. The comical value of *The Two Monkeys*, even if the very idea is funny, is still increased by the conclusion the monkeys draw from the performance:

(e) ...When they strain beyond their guide,
I laugh to scorn the mimic pride.
For how fantastic is the sight,
To meet men always bolt upright,
Because we sometimes walk on two! -
I hate the imitating crew.

5. 8. Fable L. *The Hare and Many Friends*

Fable L, the last fable of the first volume, is an illustration of the proverb: "A friend in need is a friend indeed. The surface structure of this fable is based on the positive: negative opposition of the Hare (the positive actor) and other animals (collective negative actor). Its deep structure consists in the clash of the concepts of true and untrue friendship, which makes the diagram quite schematic:

Hare	:	Animals
+	:	–

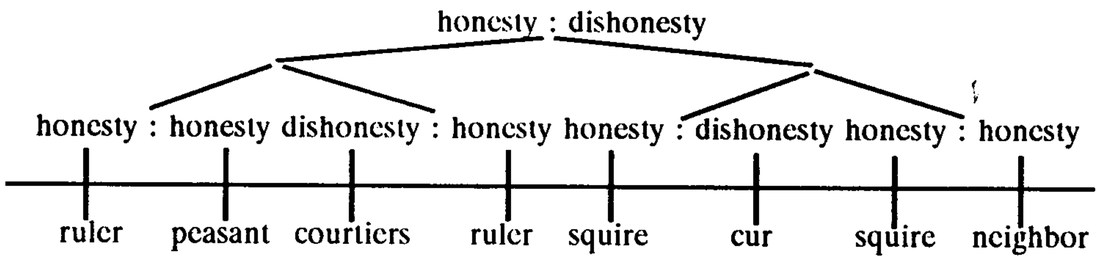
It is worth noting that this fable includes the author's self-reference in the first two lines of the fable proper, which Gay could have inserted there in order to reinforce the message of the fable with the voice of his personal experience of a situation similar to that of the Hare.

5. 9. Fable VI. *The Squire and His Cur*

This is another fable belonging to the series characteristic for a certain complexity of the fable proper. It is important to add that *The Squire and His Cur* comes from the second volume of Gay's *Fables*, and as it has already been mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, the structure of the fables belonging to that volume is somewhat different than in the case of those in the previous one.

Again, as in the case of *The Painter Who Pleased Nobody and Everybody*, the

fable falls into two parts, this time constituting two different fables proper, both of which illustrate the same moral. Therefore, again, we have to do with a multi-level underlying structure:

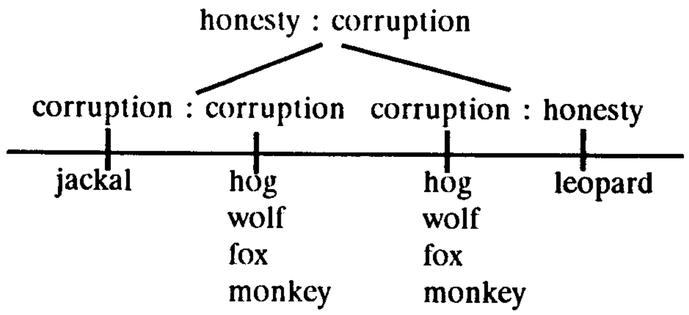


If we excluded from our consideration the points of reference, i.e., the Ruler from the first branch of the diagram and the Squire from the other, we would be left with with the original deep level opposition of the "proto-clash between honesty and dishonesty, realized at the surface level as the juxtaposition of the peasant and the courtiers on one hand, and the cur vs. the neighbor on the other. The schematic diagram is then as follows:

Peasant	:	Courtiers		Cur	:	Neighbor
+	:	−	and	−	:	+

5. 10. Fable IX. *The Jackal, Leopard and Other Beasts*

The structural analysis of this fable does not differ much from the one of *The Painter Who Pleased Nobody and Everybody*. Also, in this case, the story falls into two parts. Unlike in the case of *The Squire and His Cur*, the parts do not constitute separate fables proper, and therefore the diagram will be much simpler:



Again, if we neglect the point of reference, we face the original Honesty: Corruption clash, represented on the surface by the positive: negative juxtaposition of Leopard and Jackal.

The schematic diagram will be the following:

Leopard	:	Jackal
+	:	−

6. Closing remarks

The present paper does not presume to be either exhaustive or novel. It attempts, however, to transform vague intuitions concerning the deep structure of the neo-classical fable into an intersubjectively verifiable model. The most important methodological assumption of the model is its *polarity*, or in other words, the pre-supposition that the mechanism of every deep level contrast in narrative literature is that of *two* basic oppositions or their combinations.

Before I finish this paper, I would like to add a handful of personal remarks on John Gay's *Fables*. Well written and witty, the *Fables* shine with *decorum* and poetic diction, at the same time being vivid and straightforward. In spite of the fact that they were created more than two centuries ago, the *Fables* have lost neither their importance nor their validity. Although in animal disguise, the world of humans presented by Gay is equally ridiculous as ours. The evil, revealed in the fables, is our share as well as it was for John Gay's contemporaries. The moral issues raised in the little masterpieces are timeless, and evoke serious reflection on human nature, and on our own.

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