

Art is in the House

— FAMILY ACTIVITY: FABLE CHARACTERS

Exercise to build a character from La Fontaine's Fables.

By Talia Hallmona



Have fun as a family interpreting fables.

Who is La Fontaine? Jean de La Fontaine (born July 8, 1621 in Château-Thierry in the Aisne, and died April 13, 1695 in Paris) was a French fabulist, moralist and novelist who worked as a master of water and forests.

During his tours, he observed the behavior of animals. This inspired him to write fables. La Fontaine used anthropomorphism (personification): he staged animals with human features to criticize humans. For example, behind the lion hides the king. He is famous for his fables inspired by those of the Greek fabulist Aesop, the Latin fabulist Phaedra and Pilpay. La Fontaine wrote more than 240 fables during his life.

What is a fable? They are collected in 12 books. The first six books, dedicated to the Dauphin, were published in 1668. Then the second collection of fables, books VII to XI, was published ten years later. Finally, Book XII was published in 1693-1694, after Jean de la Fontaine was elected to the French Academy.

Although it features animals, it is the shortcomings of men that La Fontaine portrays with such talent.

He says so, for example, at the end of the fable Le Héron :

*It is not to the herons
That I am talking; listen, humans, another tale;
You will see that from you, I have drawn these lessons...*



Intended public of this activity: from 4 years old.

Required material:

Various clothing accessories.

For example: boots and shoes, mom's high heels and dad's slippers, toque and straw hat, sheet and coat.

Preparation:

- Leave a space around you that allows you to walk easily.
- Place the linen accessories around you.
- You can put on music to liven up your activity. I advise you to prepare a list of songs that are different in rhythm and style.

Get ready to explore the characters in the Fables using your body and physical language.

Some artists have used this method in the past:

Italian actors of Commedia dell'arte



Charlie Chaplin



Theatrical Farces



Course of the activity:

- Read aloud the proposed La Fontaine's fables.
- Choose one. You can reread it several times in order to grasp the meaning of the story and the characters. Is the character cunning, meticulous, fearful, proud, happy, fearless, worried, proud, cheerful, loud, wicked, vivacious?

Now you will explore the figure and the body language of this character.

***Warm up:** Stretch. Walk in the space you have set up.

Explore the following walks:

on your toes, on your heels, walk slowly (almost in slow motion), quickly, walk with your knees bent, or with your buttocks out, tuck your chest in, bend your shoulders, extend your chin. Walk imagining that you weigh tons like an elephant, you are as light as a bird. Take small steps like a mouse.

Now explore the figures in your fable: grasshopper, ant, crow, fox, turtle, hare...



Choose one or two characteristics for the construction of your character.

Have fun with the costume accessories!

Walk : is your character's walk slow or fast? Do they walk on the toes or heels of the feet, knees bent, buttocks out or in, chest forward or slumped. Pretend you are walking on eggs, a log bridge or in a swamp.

Head : Imagine that your nose traces the outline of clouds, that you have a feather on your chin that writes, or that your eyes fight against sleep.

Arms : your arms are like wheat in the wind, your fingers are flapping, or you're slapping all around your body to kill mosquitoes.

Torso : your spine is a snake, your torso is inflated like a balloon, your ribs are tickled.

Legs : your legs are algae, brittle branches, hen's or fox's feet.

Now add an emotion, state or feeling: mischievous, assertive, curious, suspicious, anxious, lost, moved, happy, confident or passionate.

Debrief: Which body part was the easiest for you to explore? The most difficult? Did you discover new aspects of yourself? Do you have a favorite character? Why is it your favorite character?

To wrap up, make a parade of your characters and take pictures of yourself!

Some fables from La Fontaine

The Grasshopper and The Ant

English version by W. T. Larned



The Grasshopper, singing
All summer long,
Now found winter stinging,
And ceased in his song.
Not a morsel or crumb in his cupboard—
So he shivered, and ceased in his song.

Miss Ant was his neighbor;
To her he went:
“O, you’re rich from labor,
And I’ve not a cent.
Lend me food, and I vow I’ll return it,
Though at present I have not a cent.”

The Ant’s not a lender,
I must confess.
Her heart’s far from tender
To one in distress.
So she said: “Pray, how passed you the summer,
That in winter you come to distress?”

“I sang through the summer,”
Grasshopper said.
“But now I am glummer
Because I’ve no bread.”
“So you sang!” sneered the Ant.
“That relieves me.
Now it’s winter—go dance for your bread!”

The Crow and the Fox



At the top of a tree perched Master Crow;
In his beak he was holding a cheese.
Drawn by the smell, Master Fox spoke, below.
The words, more or less, were these:
“Hey, now, Sir Crow! Good day, good day!
How very handsome you do look, how grandly distingué!
No lie, if those songs you sing
Match the plumage of your wing,
You’re the phoenix of these woods, our choice.”
Hearing this, the Crow was all rapture and wonder
To show off his handsome voice,
He opened beak wide and let go of his plunder
The Fox snapped it up and then said, “My Good Sir,
Learn that each flatterer
Lives at the cost of those who heed.
This lesson is well worth the cheese, indeed.”
The Crow, ashamed and sick,
Swore, a bit late, not to fall again for that trick.

The Hare and the Tortoise



Said the Tortoise one day to the Hare:
“I’ll run you a race if you dare.
I’ll bet you cannot
Arrive at that spot
As quickly as I can get there.”
Quoth the Hare: “You are surely insane.
Pray, what has affected your brain?
You seem pretty sick.
Call a doctor in - quick,
And let him prescribe for your pain.”
“Never mind,” said the Tortoise. “Let’s run!
Will you bet me?” “Why, certainly.” “Done!”
While the slow Tortoise creeps
Mr. Hare makes four leaps,
And then loafs around in the sun.
It seemed such a one-sided race,
To win was almost a disgrace.
So he frolicked about
Then at last he set out -
As the Tortoise was as nearing the place.
Too late! Though he sped like a dart,
The Tortoise was first. She was smart:
“You can surely run fast,”
She remarked. “Yet you’re last.
It is better to get a good start.”

ACTIVITY CREATED BY

