

## Folklore and Animals in *Le Collège Noir*

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Submission date: 27.07.2024

Acceptance date : 09.01.2025

Publication date : 10.01.2025

**Ex  
PROFESSO**

*Volume 10 / Issue 01 / Year 2025*

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### *Abstract*

This paper explores the visual and narrative representations of animals in the comic *Le Collège Noir*. It investigates the folkloric dimension of the storyworld that balances between folkloric stability and variability. By depicting animals as cunning, wise, and at times evil, the narrative preserves the image of the archetypal animal with anthropomorphic characteristics. In doing so, the comic books and their adaptive revision create a space where everything is possible for a quest to be undertaken. The interplay between folklore, mystery, and wisdom in a detective-like narrative calls for animals to unveil hidden truths and unlock buried secrets. The transmedial approach allows for the study to cross mediums, times, and genres to highlight the interwoven narrative and visual elements that imagine together animal characters capable of reciprocating human mystery and wisdom.

**Keywords:** Animal characters; Comics; Folkloresque; *Le Collège Noir*; Storyworld.

Url de la revue :

<https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/484>

## INTRODUCTION

Folklore functions as a dynamic and adaptive system preserving cultural and historical continuity. While it accommodates innovation, subverts ambivalence, and reflects on stability, it enhances variability and fluidity to modernize stories across time, space, and medium. Through fairytales, myths, and legends, expressed textually and visually, folkloric tradition reinforces cultural identity celebrating a unique heritage of strong communal participation and environmental awareness. With its intergenerational dimension, authors today blend old and new narrative elements to (re)create evolving literary and cultural practices.

Animals occupy a significant place in folklore. Their roles and representations can differ serving various symbolic, moral, and cultural purposes. In quest narratives, animals with anthropomorphic characteristics bring valuable assistance to the hero's journey (Hauke, 2022). *Le Collège Noir*<sup>i</sup>, a storyworld that blends folklore with a thriller detective-like fiction, unlocks animals' potentials in assisting with the investigations led by a group of friends. It blurs all boundaries between humans and other creatures capturing the necessity to consider how evil oscillates between the two worlds.

Natural evil in folkloric tradition reflects the fear of the natural world. Ulysse Malassagne, creator of *Le Collège Noir* comic books<sup>ii</sup>, defied the uncontrollable factor of the malevolent forces by attributing traces of wisdom to animals. He rearranged the hierarchy between all creatures reducing only ignorance to an inferior position in the storyworld. By attributing wisdom to animals, Malassagne creates a more harmonious and interconnected storytelling heightening the tension and intrigue essential to a detective narrative.

Within three comic books and an animated series, creators<sup>iii</sup> of *Le Collège Noir* built a world that transformed the environment from a mere backdrop into an active participant in the narrative. This dynamic world is intricately detailed, with ancient locations and bewildering woods home to animals that offer guidance and secrets critical to the unfolding mysteries behind the disappearance of Jonas<sup>iv</sup> and Samuel (Sam)<sup>v</sup>. Through rich worldbuilding, *Le Collège Noir* weaves folklore, mythology, and the natural ecosystem into the plot, preserving traditional themes and images while adapting roles to contemporary contexts and cultural significance.

This paper claims that the narrative adopts a folkloric style to maintain elements of a thriller detective-like storyline, its visual and textual characteristics preserve the image of the archetypal animals with anthropomorphic characteristics that assist humans in solving mysteries and unlocking secrets. Critics and artists continue to observe that “[t]he visual animal is caught in an argument over whether the animal should be considered on its own terms or understood through a network of human-animal relations” (Burt, 2002, p. 188). Therefore, the study explores how reintegrating traditional folklore creates a storyworld where these relations are possible in many forms. The story integrates folkloresque elements, where animals often possess wisdom and symbolic significance, with the suspense and intrigue typical to detective fiction. Despite the modern and investigative nature of the plot, these animals retain their mythological attributes, resisting any shifts that would strip them of their roles and features.

The transmedial approach recognizes the dynamic and dialogical nature of a storyworld existing within various mediums. By adapting *Le Collège Noir* from a comic book to an animated series, Ulysse Malassagne and Magali Pouzol revised and recreated the narrative highlighting the elements of a detective story. This adaptive revision (re)discovers the storyworld that expands to represent animals and spaces as essential narrative elements contributing to the solving of mysteries. In *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), author Mark J. P. Wolf clarifies how created worlds are “dynamic entities” with not only transmedial narrative features but transformative and transauthorial ones as well. Similarly, Jan-Noël Thon argues in *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (2016) that “there usually is more to the world of a narrative representation than can unproblematically be said to be part of its story” (Thon, 2016, pp. 36-37). This refers to a condition in transmedia storytelling: an adaptation is an expansion, a version of the original text emphasizing the fluidity of the narrative (Bryant, 2013). John Bryant proposes the fluid-text approach in a transmedial context as it regards the storyworld as a progressive production that stretches back and forth in time to other cultural sources and inspirations. This paper explores the storyworld created in the comic books and expanded in the animated series focusing on integrated elements and their stability, adaptability, and variability.

## I. THE FOLKLORESQUE IN COMICS

If understood as an organic phenomenon, folklore is the whole of the system described as folkloric. It “is one of these three: a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, or a kind of art” (Ben-Amos, 1971, p. 5). Ben-Amos recognizes that the categories are not restrictive of their own components. But by blending all three in a fluid and adaptable sense, this system becomes dynamic, constantly shaped by the interactions, traditions, and beliefs of the community it represents. It is not one of three but all three together incorporating myths (a body of knowledge) symbolizing a collective perception of reality (a mode of thought) within a textual and visual storyworld (a kind of art). Accordingly, comics and their adaptations become a body that intersects with folklore. However, it would be misleading to name a kind of art *folklore*. When Michael Dylan Foster experienced a similar issue, he found the word *folkloresque* to be the most appropriate (Foster, 2016).

Foster proposes to consider *folkloresque* as a conceptual tool that explains

*how folklore functions in a world of cultural and artistic expression (...). It is a tool that encourages us to reenvision categories such as folklore and popular culture, to explore how they mutually influence each other, and to productively problematize distinctions between them* (Foster, 2016, p. 4).

It is the perception, production, and performance of folklore within a popular culture genre or medium (cinema, video games, graphic novels, or comics) that render it folkloresque. It is imbued with a sense of authenticity that amplifies the creators' desire to associate the real with the imaginary. In its essence, folkloresque is adaptive, dynamic, and recreative using integration in art (Foster, 2016). It could also be transcultural, transmedial, and transauthorial reciprocating its narrative dimension with art in general, and comics in particular.

In thriller comics, authors integrate folkloric motifs to allegorize specific ideas. In *Le Collège Noir*, Malassagne's folkloresque revives witches, animals, and demons to infuse the detective-like narrative with folktale elements. Both the comic

and the animated series establish a dark atmosphere with opening panels and frames placing the main character(s) in medieval locations.



Figure 1: Opening of *Le Collège Noir*: *Le Livre de la Lune* (Malassagne, *Le Collège Noir*, 2023, p. 6)

This setting, rich in detailed artifacts and shadows, creates a sense of intimacy and mystery. The presence of books and drawings, seemingly about myths and legends of a red dragon, hints at a connection to stories, suggesting the character's engagement with magical or supernatural themes. Panels also depict an ominous forest path, a fortified medieval-style door, an old, cluttered room illuminated by thin light with the presence of a fireplace and woods, a demonic gargoyle, and various mythological symbols. These settings contribute to a dark, eerie atmosphere reviving historical and folkloric motifs that underscore the narrative's thematic exploration of the unknown.

Medieval settings are also central in the animated series. They evoke a sense of the ancient and timeless struggle between good and evil, as portrayed in the opening sword fight against dark monsters.



Figure 2: Opening of *Le Collège Noir: Complainte d'Auvergne* (Malassagne & Pouzol, *Le Collège Noir: Complainte d'Auvergne*, 2023)

Malassagne and Pouzol invoke the influence of folklore in popular culture adaptively modernizing this scene to assert the opposing and conflicting nature between these powers. The resemblance to RPG (Role-Playing Games) adds another layer to the narrative as “it seems as if explicitly folkloric characters and motifs are often the driving force behind many of the most popular video games and role-playing games (RPGs)” (Foster, 2016, p. 16). This blend of RPG elements within the first episode’s opening helps bridge the gap between ancient myths and contemporary storytelling forms, such as comics and animated series. While the scene maintains the atmospheric stability of darkness known to medieval settings, it alludes to a variable perception

about surviving it. Additionally, the characters' search for their missing friend's journal reinforces the narrative's connection to folklore while maintaining the thrilling, detective-like essence. Both the comic and the animated series establish a dark and immersive storyworld where folkloresque elements and modern narratives converge, creating a space for other species to exist.

Similarly to a panel, a frame that contains both text and image in a comic book, the creators of the storyworld integrated the frame narrative technique only to blur all boundaries and lines afterwards. By telling a story within a story, a technique in storytelling inspired from *The Arabian Nights*, the narrative fosters a detective subplot. In *Le Livre de la Lune*, the protagonist Ulysse embeds the story of his own childhood, full of strange and frightening adventures, to lend credibility to the narrator, making the detective subplot more engaging and believable. He entitles his autobiographical comic book *Les Souvenirs du Collège Noir*,<sup>vi</sup> recounting personal experiences from his own memory to assert authenticity and truth of his accounts and establish credibility. Although the storyworld of *Le Collège Noir* is subcreated and secondary to the reader, it is primary to Ulysse, the narrator, and intersectional with the real world for Ulysse Malassagne.

The storyworld is built on "the mechanisms of allusion" that "create a coherent new whole" (Foster, 2016, p. 15). The frame narrative technique and its purpose are adapted with stability in the animated series. Malassagne and Pouzol embedded within episode 1, a story of a hero, a dwarf, an elf, and a mage battling dark creatures to retrieve Jonas' journal. This new territory the storyworld embedded is representational of both temporal and spatial aspects. Not only it sets characters in a medieval time, but it also places them in a party and a space that resonate with Tolkien's Middle-earth. *Le Collège Noir* is not just a story of a boarding school with children living an adventure, it is an entire subcreated world. Its creators allude to J. R. R. Tolkien's influence by employing typical characters, such as the hero, the dwarf, the elf, and the wizard, and by placing a figurine of Bilbo Baggins in Jonas' treasure box. Tolkien's subcreation is a term coined to denote the authorial imagining of fantastic worlds. But in *Le Collège Noir*, the subcreation of the storyworld is variable. Similarly to a story within a story technique, the narrative presents a world within a world; it unveiled the world of animals and other creatures to Ulysse and his companions when the investigations about Jonas began. The realm of the other species unlocks to portray animals and their roles in this narrative.

Accordingly, the folkloresque elements in *Le Collège Noir* enrich the narrative by weaving traditional folklore within modern storytelling. The integration of medieval settings, archetypal characters, and mythological motifs creates a dark and immersive storyworld that bridges the gap between the ancient and the contemporary. By employing the frame narrative technique and alluding to Tolkien's subcreation, Malassagne and Pouzol craft a multilayered story that blurs the lines between reality and fantasy. The presence of anthropomorphized animals and other folkloric beings not only enhances the sense of mystery but also underscores the timeless significance of folklore in shaping collective perceptions and cultural expressions.

## II. ANIMAL PORTRAYAL AND ROLE IN LE COLLÈGE NOIR

In *Le Collège Noir*, animals serve as multifaceted characters intertwining with the themes of wisdom, mystery, and adventure. Their roles are integral to the unfolding of the story, each embodying distinct archetypes that resonate with

folklore. Through a close reading of the narrative, its symbolic meanings, and the visual representations of these animal characters in the comics and the animated series, their contribution to the detective-like atmosphere can be uncovered while echoing the timeless significance of their role in storytelling. As archetypes that represent fundamental human motifs and universal symbols or characters, animals evoke deep emotional responses and convey complex themes of unfamiliarity and estrangement. Their archetypes become even more significant as they embody human traits and roles, introducing to the narrative aspects of anthropomorphism. In a detective story, anthropomorphized animal characters enhance the sense of mystery and intrigue, as their familiar yet enigmatic nature raises questions about humanity in the animal world.

## II. 1. THE FOX AND THE RAVEN

In the beginning of *Le Livre de la Lune*, Oussama's (Ouss) surprising encounter with a fox, deep in the forest and in the night, opens the encounter between the animal world and the human one. Symbolically, the fox "seemingly possesses its own inner light, like the shifting, mysterious "foxfire" that luminesces eerily in marsh and forest, representing a more chthonic form of consciousness than man's" (Bonnberg & Martin, 2010, p. 278). Its instinct-driven awareness transcends human understanding suggesting the presence of hidden truths. With it uttering "you have nothing to do here! Run, poor humans!!!" (Malassagne, 2023, p. 14), Oussama remains bewildered and unable to comprehend what he had just heard establishing the role of animals as guiding co-inhabitants in the storyworld.

The fox represents cunning and wisdom in many cultural traditions, often serving as a guide or a trickster. In this context, its warning suggests a deeper knowledge of the forest's dangers and an awareness of the boundary between the human and the supernatural realms. While itself running away from the witch's ceremony, it recognized the creatures crossing its path as humans, ignorant of what surrounds them. The fox's anthropomorphized nature blurs these boundaries again when it met Ulysse and Step in another dangerous situation, "you are still outside! Don't stay here!" "It's the time of the beast!" (Malassagne, 2023, p. 56), bridging once more between the known and the unknown. Its role heightens the sense of foreboding hinting at its superior understanding of the situation and the potential futility of the humans' efforts. The fox acts as a liminal figure, aware of the boundaries and the consequences of crossing them. With its continuous warnings, tension within the story rises adding to the many mysteries the children are investigating.

In the adaptive revision of the storyworld, creators Malassagne and Pouzol depicted the fox with symbolic stability. The animal is first seen in the opening credits establishing its significance and importance in the narrative.



Figure 3: The Fox in *Le Collège Noir*

It is positioned in the foreground of the scene while the background is filled with trees and foliage that create a sense of depth and mystery, emphasizing its role as a guide. Standing on a pathway that cuts through the forest, indicating opposing forces or parallel worlds, the fox symbolizes the choices the characters face throughout the narrative. The duality of decisions represented in the two sides of the path announces the different views and outcomes for both humans and animals. The muted tones dominating the colour palette indicate the uncertainty of characters in making decisive decisions. However, the contrast the fox brings, with its reddish-brown fur and glowing eyes, reveals the instinctual and enlightening knowledge about a world dark to humans. The fox stands solitarily in a central role of assistance from the beginning of the narrative guiding characters through spaces between oppositional parallels.

The fox in the animated version is associated with the crow, an image not unfamiliar to folkloric representations. Before confirming their friend's death, Ulysse, Mei, Step, Ouss, and Krum ventured into the forest to investigate a castle they know Jonas had visited. On their way back, a crow, perched on a branch, observed them from above alluding to a painting with both animals as its subjects. "In Homer's painting, a lithe russet fox runs through deep snow, apparently pursued by hunters and baying hounds to the sea's edge, even as the black crows above portend its approaching death" (Bonnberg & Martin, 2010, p. 278). The juxtaposing of the image of the running fox on the ground and the ominous crow on a tree symbolizes the tension between life and death. The opening sequence of the second episode becomes a tableau of a life at its near death, foreshadowing Jonas' fate. But the children appearing in between the two shots of the animals places humans in the line that separates the known and the unknown, the mystery that detective (like) narratives investigate with the help of animals. The visual contrast in episode 2 deepens themes of death and mystery, creating an atmosphere of tension and intrigue.

## II. 2. THE OWL

The owl is the manifestation of wisdom in *Le Collège Noir*. Throughout cultures and times, "owls have become symbols of both acute awareness (...) and of the stunning power of death" (Bonnberg & Martin, 2010, p. 254). Its nocturnal nature and ability to see in the dark make it a powerful emblem of insight and knowledge. In *Le Livre de la Lune*, the owl uncovered the truth about what curse the witch cast on the children who disturbed her soul collecting ritual. It tells the inquiring party,

*I can tell you things. There exist between your world and that of darkness countless nuances. The witch's mark now allows you to gaze through these nuances, deep into the heart of darkness... But from then on, the darkness also fixes its gaze on you... and it will relentlessly hunt you down* (Malassagne, 2023, p. 33)

Its knowledge about the world of darkness, along with its connection to death accentuates on its profound understanding of life's mysteries and the natural order. It embodies the dual aspects that align together in wisdom; "but the depth of the owl's wisdom includes not only the ability to bring what is dark into the light, but also the ability to live in the dark itself" (Bonnberg & Martin, 2010, p. 254). It shares this wisdom about living in darkness with the children informing them "you don't get rid of it. You learn to live with it. The evil feeds on your fear. Regain your courage and you might have a chance" (Malassagne, 2023, p. 33). The owl's assertion that "the

evil feeds on your fear” connects with the concept of fear as a vulnerability. The children’s response to their fear becomes crucial; they can regain their courage and can shift the balance of power by learning more about it. The owl’s advice and teachings can be seen as a classic call to bravery, serving to propel them into action, not just for survival but for growth and experience.

Accordingly, the owl facilitates the transition between innocence and experience when investigating mysteries. It appears again in *Le Livre de la Neige* to guide Lena, the school attendant, to the children who were being attacked by the tempest demon that sensed their vulnerability. The bird asserts its archetype, of the wise mentor, bridging between learning about the truth and experiencing it. Lena, who had already survived the curse, spent years learning the ways of the realm of darkness and searching for her partner Sam who disappeared into it. It is the owl’s role in the narrative that led Lena to bravely face all enemies and reveal her secrets to Ulysse, Mei, Step, Ouss, and Krum. With its “stunning power of death,” the owl helped Lena realize how to face darkness, death, and demons. While the animal character explained what the realm of darkness is and how to live alongside it to the children asking for it, the human character Lena thought that hiding the truth would protect them. Symbolically, the owl blurs the line between the world of the child and the adult juxtaposing it with the blurring of boundaries separating darkness from light. It asserts that the path to truth is one and animal role is pivotal for its continuity.

In *Le Collège Noir: Complainte d'Auvergne*, Malassagne and Pouzol adapted the owl with variability.



Figure 4: The Owl in *Le Collège Noir*

While it does not appear until episode 4, it maintains its knowledge holding and sharing characteristics. However, the owl remains as dark as the night, asserting mystery and the investigative plot of this version. While learning about their curse from the bird, all Step and Mei could see were its glowing eyes. Their illumination symbolizes the insight and awareness the girls would possess. Their reflection in the owl's eye depicts their quest for knowledge and guidance from a wise mentor. The contrast with the dark background emphasizes their vulnerability and insecurity in investigating the many mysteries unfolding before their eyes. Though they had previously read books looking for some clues, the owl advised the children to search for answers in a hidden part in the library, asserting some truths cannot always be found in front of our eyes. The atmosphere around them suggests that the knowledge the owl holds may come with complexities and challenges, aligning with the narrative's themes of investigation into the unknown. The enigmatic nature of their situation, depicted through the dark silhouette of the bird against a starry night sky, parallels their unsolved case. Although the owl and other animals provided help, every part remains a piece of a puzzle they are struggling to complete. The visual representations of characters and their background deepen their uncertainty urging for a collective work of both world inhabitants to find answers.

Unlike the anthropomorphic nature of the owl, many animals possess no human characteristics in *Le Collège Noir*. In fact, they are rendered even more gigantic and beastlier for demonic purposes. A mole, a wolf, a cat, a raven and others are under the control of the *Lord of the Darkness*. Their attacks are frequent and consistent aiming to prevent Ulysse, Mei, Step, Ouss, and Krum from uncovering any truths. They guard the obscured truths, create an atmosphere of dread, and call for chaos and fear. Their shadowy role in a detective (like) narrative underscores different facets of the investigative journey of the heroes. While they serve as allegorical representations of the traits needed to solve mysteries and navigate the complexities of human nature, they enrich the narrative by adding symbolism and themes of observation, mystery, and wisdom.

## CONCLUSION

Animals are a natural component in *Le Collège Noir*. They play a major role in the storyworld carrying the element of magic and the unfamiliar. However, their symbolic and folkloresque familiarity is not just symbolic to such narratives but central to its very nature. With animals such as a fox warning about eminent danger, an owl speaking wisely, and a wolf and a crow representing the power of evil, these characters become the archetypes of mystery, wisdom, and evil in detective (like) narratives. This dynamic interplay of folklore and popular culture in the storyworld of *Le Collège Noir* exemplifies how the folkloresque serves as a powerful tool for reimagining and revitalizing traditional representations of animals within modern artistic mediums. The portrayal of animals in *Le Collège Noir* integrates in the narrative multifaceted characters that embody archetypal themes of wisdom, mystery, and adventure. Through their symbolic and visual representations, these animals contribute significantly to the story's detective atmosphere, blending folklore with anthropomorphism to deepen the exploration of humanity within the animal world. The timeless presence, role, and significance of animals in storytelling offers multiple representative layers creating an immersive storyworld and an intriguing narrative of human animal adventures.

<sup>i</sup> It translates to *The Dark School*, written by Ulysse Malassagne in three part and published between 2016 and 2019. All translations from French to English in this paper were done by the author.

<sup>ii</sup> The three books are: *Le livre de la Lune* (2016), *Le livre de la pierre* (2017), *Le livre de la neige* (2019). They translate to: *The Book of the Moon*, *The Book of the Stone*, and *The Book of the Snow*.

<sup>iii</sup> While originally written by Ulysse Malassagne, the animated series, entitled, is directed by the author and rewritten for the screen alongside Magali Pouzol.

<sup>iv</sup> According to Book one and the Animated series.

<sup>v</sup> According to Book 2 and 3

<sup>vi</sup> It translates to: *The Memories of the Dark School*

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### TO QUOTE THE AUTHOR:

Belazouz, Asma, (2025), « Folklore and Animals in *Le Collège Noir* », Ex Professo, V 10, N 01, pp. 35- 44, Url : <https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/484>