



People are fascinated by bats. For centuries bats have been used throughout the world as powerful images in art and craft, associated with many different cultures and meaning different things to different people. Symbols can be widely recognised as the viewer doesn't need to be literate to understand their meaning.



Much folklore around the world has cast the bat in a bad role. Bats have often been misunderstood and many of its symbolic meanings are inappropriately fear-based. In Biblical tradition, bats were believed to be messengers of Satan. The Puritans believed that if a bat flew close to someone, somebody was trying to bewitch them.



Since bats are mostly nocturnal animals people simply were not familiar with these creatures; often what is unfamiliar is misunderstood; folklore is rich with tales speculating on how creatures as mysterious as bats came to be.

Myths and tales often included, for instance, the bat's tendency to cross the border between the world of mammals and birds; depending on the situation and needs, it defined itself either as one or the other. And of course, dwelling in dark caves, which in many cultures were considered to be the gateway to the land of death, bats were associated with darkness and death.

The Chinese, however, view the bat as a symbol of happiness. In China small single syllable words can have many meanings. The Chinese

for bat (fu 蝠) sounds identical to the word for good fortune (fu 福), and also means happiness, wealth and longevity. Five bats together represent the 'Five Blessings' (wufu 五福): long life, wealth, health, love of virtue and a peaceful death.

Their use of echolocation enables bats to fly in huge hoards while never hitting each other. Because of this and their manoeuvrability even in the dark, in some cultures bats represent the perception of things that others cannot see. To the Indian tribes of the north-western United States, bats are symbols of diligence, while in the Great Plains they imparted wisdom on their people. In the southwest and Mexico, they are representative of death and rebirth, because they go underground in the early morning, and then appear again each night in a noisy hoard. So they are reborn every night, flooding out from their caves.

The bat has been used as a heraldic symbol in the coats of arms of a number of towns and cities in Spain, like Valencia. The heraldic emblem for the old county of Breconshire in Wales (known colloquially as Brecknock) has six bats on its shield. The local bat group display this shield on their Brecknock Bat Group headed notepaper.

Bats are included in the badges of several RAF squadrons. The No. 9 Squadron RAF adopted the bat badge in 1917 along with the Latin motto *Per Noctem Volamus* "We fly through the night".



Research other towns and squadrons using bats in their badges and heraldic arms. Can you discover the reason behind their choice?

Why are there bats on the labels of Bacardi rum?

Where else can you find bats used as emblems?

Can you discover myths and folklore from around the world involving bats?



Bats have a powerful image and often arouse strong feelings, of admiration and respect or fear and dislike. This can be seen in different cultures and folklore around the world. The way people feel about bats affects the way they write about them, and can also be affected by what they read and hear, even if its not true. How do you think the writers of these pieces felt about bats?

Can you write a poem or descriptive piece about bats, showing your feelings? Now, using your imagination, write another expressing the opposite view.

Echolocation

Seeing in sound, the bat sings a solo

Echoes enriched in the reflections of the night

Detailing the dark, defining its world

A capella performed with the wind

The familiar sound of woodland and water

A minimalist music.

The echo of a maybug modulated by movement

Its wings glinting, a beating beacon

A promise of food in the shifting soundscape

The night insects, unsuspecting mirrors

Betray their presence to the hunter

The night singer, seeing it's way in sound.

John Altringham

A bat is no bird but a winged
mouse; for she creeps with her
wings. Is without feathers and
flyeth with a kind of skein as
bees and flies do.

Excepting that the Bats wings
hath a farre thicker and stronger
skin.

And this creature thus mungress-
like, cannot look very lovely.

John Swan in 1635

The Bat

By Ogden Nash

Myself, I rather like the bat,
It's not a mouse, it's not a rat.
It has no feathers, yet has wings,
Its quite inaudible when it sings,
It zigzags through the evening air
And never lands on ladies hair,
A fact of which men spend their lives
Attempting to convince their wives.

Read Ruth Pitter's poem, *The Bat*, not worrying about words you may not understand, but trying to feel what she experienced.

How did she feel at the beginning of the poem?

How did she feel at the end? What made her change her mind about bats?

Search for other poetry and prose about bats, and compare how each writer felt about bats.

The Bat

Lightless, unholy, eldritch thing,
Whose murky and erratic wing
Swoops so sickently, and whose
Aspect to the female Muse
Is a demon's made of stuff
Like tattered, sooty waterproof,
Looking dirty, clammy, cold.

Wicked, poisonous and old;
I have maligned thee!...for the Cat
Lately caught a little bat,
Seized it softly, bore it in.
On the carpet, dark as sin
In the lamplight, painfully
It limped about, and could not fly.

Even fear must yield to love,
And pity make the depths to move
Though sick with horror, I must
stoop,
Grasp it gently, take it up,
And carry it, and place it where
It could resume the twilight air.

Strange revelation! Warm as milk,
Clean as a flower, smooth as silk!
O what a piteous face appears,
What great fine thin translucent ears!
What chestnut down and crapy
wings,
Finer than any lady's things –
And O a little one that clings!

Warm, clean, and lovely, though
not fair,
And burdened with a mother's care:
Go hunt the hurtful fly, and bear
My blessing to your kind in air.

Ruth Pitter

