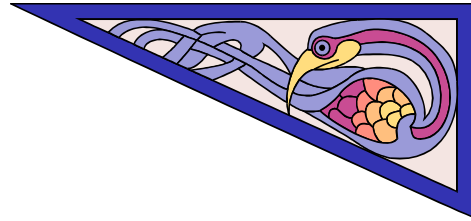
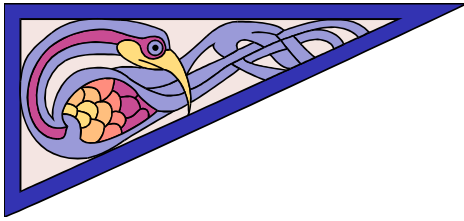


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## **BIRDS AS SYMBOL: A FLIGHT THROUGH FOLKTALE, BALLAD, AND POETRY**

This is a paper with visual elements to show how birds are used symbolically to represent spirits or souls in folklore of various countries, especially those of Europe and Asia. Through use of the catalog of my high school library and exploration of my personal book collection, I located material with folklore from various countries. I then perused the indices and tables of contents of these materials to locate stories, poems, and ballads with birds as important elements. I selected only those works that used this motif symbolically. The images were all obtained from Microsoft Clips Online website as free clipart and are used according to the agreement on that site.

The following items use birds as symbols of the soul or spirit:



**Cole, Joanna (1982). *The Sparrow with the Slit Tongue (Japan)*. From *Best-loved folktales of the world*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co.**

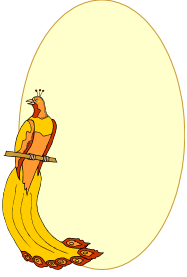
An honest and good-natured old man saves a little sparrow from being eaten and the sparrow becomes his beloved pet, much to the frustration of his greedy and trouble-making wife. She becomes jealous of the affection he has for the bird and slits its tongue while it is playing happily around the house while he is gone. She does this because she does not dare kill it. The bird in its fright and pain flies away, and the old man returns and asks for it. His angry wife scolds him and tells him the whole story, and he scolds her and spends days looking for the pet. One day, while looking for the sparrow, he stumbles upon a bamboo thicket and a little house where a lovely young lady greets him as a friend and refreshes him. It turns out that she is the sparrow. He has a lovely visit with her and her friends

and when he prepares to leave, she offers him two chests, one small and one large. He chooses the small and goes home. When he arrives, he receives the verbal abuse he expects from being gone so long, and he opens the chest while his wife rants. It turns out to be full of gold and jewels. His wife stops yelling and asks where he got the chest. He tells her the story and gets yelled at again for not selecting the larger chest. She gets the directions to the sparrow maid's house and sets out. The girl is frightened by her visit, but is hospitable. The old woman demands a present, and upon being offered the two chests, selects the larger, which she can barely move. Exhausted, but triumphant, she arrives home after dark and opens the chest, which turns out to be full of poisonous snakes. She is bitten and dies, unregretted.



**The Seven Ravens (1972). From The complete Grimm's fairy tales. New York: Pantheon.**

A man and his wife have seven sons but desperately wish for a daughter. When one is finally born, she is sickly, so they worry for her survival. The sons are sent out with a pitcher to get spring water for a hurried baptism, and the boys accidentally lost the pitcher in the well. They are afraid to return, and when they are not back the father curses them to be ravens since he fears his daughter will die un-baptized. Immediately, seven ravens fly over. The parents are sad, but they love their daughter who grows up healthy and beautiful; however, they keep her brothers' story a secret. She hears about it in the town and that she is at fault. When she asks her parents about the story, they admit the boys became ravens but assure her that she is innocent. She feels at fault, so she leaves to find her brothers, taking a few things with her. She travels far, meeting the sun, the moon, and the stars; the latter help her by telling her that her brothers are in a glass mountain and then give her a drumstick as a key to open it. When she arrives at the mountain, the drumstick is missing, so she cuts off her little finger to open the door. A dwarf greets her and has her wait for her brothers while he sets their food out. She nibbles on each plate and drops her parents' ring (which she has brought along) into the last glass. She hides and, when the ravens come home, they notice the food missing. When they see the ring, they realize their sister is there and call for her to come out. When they see her, they are restored to human and all go home.



**The Golden Bird (1972). From The complete Grimm's fairy tales. New York: Pantheon.**

A king has a tree that bears golden apples that keep disappearing one each night. He calls his three sons to figure out who is stealing the apples. The eldest tries first but falls asleep and misses the culprit. The second son tries with the same result. The third son sets out despite his father's lack of faith in him, and he stays awake to witness the arrival of a golden bird at midnight. When it plucks the apple he shoots it with an arrow. It lives but drops a feather. He picks up the feather and shows it to the king who wants the whole golden bird. He sends out the eldest who encounters a fox who pleads not to be shot and bargains with information about the bird. He advises to avoid the well-lit inn and go into the run-down one. The eldest son thinks this is silly and shoots at the fox, but misses. He goes on, chooses the bright and lively inn, and is caught up in a life of fun. The second son sets out when the eldest does not return, and has the same adventure, ending up joining his brother in a life of pleasure. After more time passes, the youngest plans to try his luck. The king does not believe he will find the bird, but he finally lets him go.

He encounters the fox and assures it that he will not shoot. The fox gives him a ride to the village and the boy follows his advice and has a quiet night. When he leaves the little inn, he meets the fox again who tells him of a castle surrounded by sleeping soldiers that contains the golden bird. He also advises the boy not to take the bird out of its plain cage and put it in a golden cage in the same room. Then he gives him another ride to the castle. The young man goes into the castle but ignores the advice and the bird screams when he moves it, waking the soldiers. He is arrested and sentenced to death. He is offered leniency if he brings this land's king a golden horse; he would also get the golden bird. He sets out looking for the horse and meets the fox again. The fox gives him advice on how to find the horse, reminding him not to put on the golden saddle instead of the wooden one. Then he gives him a ride. Once again, he ignores the advice, and the neighing horse awakens the sleeping grooms. He is arrested again and sentenced to death; however, he can go free and get the horse if he brings this king the princess from the golden castle. He sets out again and meets the frustrated fox, which offers him directions for getting the princess when she goes to bathe. After reminding him not to let her say goodbye to her parents, the fox gives him a ride.

Unfortunately, the youth lets the princess talk him into letting her take leave of her parents and he is arrested again. The only way out and to win the girl is if he moves a hill from the front of the castle in eight days. He tries shoveling for seven days, and then he gives up. The fox shows up, scolds him, and offers to do it for him while the boy rests. The job is done, the boy gets the princess, and he sets out to get the golden horse. The fox tells him how to get both the girl and the horse, and he follows the directions this time. The fox then tells him how to get the bird, too. The youth leaves the princess with the fox and successfully tricks the king out of both the bird and the horse; then he rides off to get the princess. He asks the fox what he would like as a reward, and the fox asks to be killed and decapitated. The young man refuses. The fox sadly leaves but gives him more advice that seems strange. He accidentally ignores the advice and ends up tossed in a well and his brothers run off home with the princess, bird, and horse. Luckily, the youngest survives but is stuck in the dry well. The fox saves him and advises him how not to be killed by his brothers. When he arrives in disguise, the depressed animals and princess change and become happy. The king is surprised and asks the princess about the change. She tells him the whole story including that the older brothers threatened to kill her if she told. The youngest appears, the older brothers are punished, and the princess marries the youngest. The fox meets up with him a long time later, asks to be killed again, and this time the boy does it. The fox instantly becomes human again and turns out to be the princess' brother who was bewitched.



***Jorinda and Joringel (1972). From The complete Grimm's fairy tales. New York: Pantheon.***

A witch lives in an old castle as a cat or owl by day and human by night. She uses her powers to lure animals to her to be food, and she set a spell to cause those who come within a hundred paces of her castle to be stuck in place. Maidens are turned to birds and captured to be caged in the castle. A beautiful girl named Jorinda has promised to marry handsome young Joringel and they go walking one beautiful evening. They approach too close to the castle despite reminding each other of the danger and Jorinda is changed to a nightingale while Joringel is stuck. The witch catches the nightingale, cages it, and goes into the castle. When the moon touches Joringel, he is free but cannot get to his beloved. He wanders to a nearby town, where he finds work and wanders near the castle when he can. A dream of a blood red flower with a pearl center

sends him wandering for nine days to find it. He finds a flower with a dewdrop in the center and goes back to the castle. While holding the flower, he is not affected by the spell of the castle, and he goes in. He follows the birdcalls and finds the witch feeding her seven thousand caged birds. She cannot touch him while he holds the flower, but he cannot figure out which cage holds Jorinda. He sees the witch sneaking away with a particular cage; he springs toward her touching the cage and her with the flower. The witch is now powerless and Jorinda is human again. Together they free all the rest of the birds/maidens.



***The Three Little Birds (1972). From The complete Grimm's fairy tales. New York: Pantheon.***

A king goes hunting with his ministers and is seen by three girls as they watch their cows. Each girl points to one of the men and plans to marry him, the eldest pointing to the king. The king calls them over and all three men like what they see, so they marry the girls. The two younger girls have no children and go to visit their older sister when she is about to have her son and the king is away. The jealous sisters take the baby who has a red star on him and throw him in the river. A little bird flies up at the river and says a strange verse. The sisters run off and tell the returning king that his wife had a dog instead of a baby. He shrugs it off. A childless fisherman and his wife rescue the baby. A year later, the queen is again going to have a baby, the king goes away, and the sisters steal the boy and throw him into the river. Another bird flies up saying a verse. The sisters repeat their explanation to the returning king. The fisherman saves the new little boy and raises him, too.

A third time, the queen is going to have a daughter, the king goes away, and the sisters steal the baby and throw her in the river. A third little bird flies up. When the king returns, they tell him the queen had a cat, and the king decides this is too much and throws his wife into the dungeons, where she stays many years.

The fisherman saves the daughter, too. As the children grow up, the oldest boy hears other children accuse him of being a foundling. When he asks and finds out the truth, he decides to go find his father. The reluctant fisherman lets him go, and the boy walks for a long time. He comes to a large area of water and meets an old woman fishing. He greets her and she knows his quest. She carries him on her back over the water and he continues looking for his father. The second son, the next year, sets out to find his brother, and meets the same adventure. The daughter eventually misses her brothers and seeks them out. She meets the old woman and greets her. The old woman carries her and gives her a wand with

directions to find a caged bird in a castle and a glass of water from a fountain. She follows the directions, gets the bird and the water, and meets her brothers along the way. A black dog she strikes with the wand (per directions) turns into a handsome prince and all go back to the old woman. She carries them all over the water and, now released, leaves. The children go back to the fisherman with the caged bird. The second son goes hunting one day and takes his flute along. He stops and plays it, and the old king hears it and is drawn to him. On questioning, he finds out the story of the fisherman and the children. On the fisherman telling him the story, the little bird begins to sing about the prisoner queen and the wicked sisters. The king takes the bird, the fisherman, and the children back to the castle and releases the queen, who is ill. The daughter gives her the fountain water, and she is restored. The sisters are punished and the daughter marries the handsome prince she freed.



**Yolen, Jane, ed. (1986). *The Waiting Maid's Parrot (China)*. From *Favorite folktales from around the world*. New York: Pantheon.**

A beautiful girl becomes a waiting maid for a rich man's family. He favors her and puts her in charge of a rare parrot that he receives as a gift. The bird begins to talk to her; she is startled, but lonely so she begins exchanging confidences with it. One day while she is bathing the bird escapes, and she is terrified. She takes the cage and sets it up to look like someone stole the bird. The master believes her since he knows the other maids are jealous of her.

Ten days later she is sent on an errand to another family. The handsome son of the family is reading and the parrot flies into his room and begins talking to him. It tells him to look since it has found him a bride, and when he chases it he sees the maid who is visiting his mother. They exchange glances and are interested despite their class difference. The parrot disappears. When the maid returns home, the bird is sitting on top of its cage. She grabs at it, and it protests, telling her that it has found her a husband. She listens and the bird promises to help, then it flies off. She is torn: attracted to the young man, worried about the class issue, and worried about her own situation as potential concubine to her master. When the bird returns the next day, she tells it not to bother given the situation. It flies off and returns with a love poem from the young man. She tells the parrot her desires and it flies off. It tells the young man her feelings, and he writes a love letter that the parrot delivers to the maid. Then the

young man doesn't hear from the parrot for several days. He hears a rumor of a maid of the rich man's house dying suddenly and fears something has happened. He finds out that she did die, but not why or how.

The maid receives the note, sends an earring back with a message for the young man to use it to go to her parents and buy her freedom. A stone thrown by a bad boy strikes down the parrot. Its death ends the communication. The maid keeps refusing the master's wish to make her a concubine, and she has made enemies of the other maids through her position and actions so they tell the master that she has been seeing a man (she was really talking to the parrot). His jealousy causes him to search her room where he finds the love letter. He tortures her for the truth but the story of the parrot is too fantastic to be believed, so he has her beaten. She is near death but he has her put into a coffin anyway and buried far away.

The young man has a dream where a woman wearing feathers comes to him, says she is the parrot and that the maid had been a parrot too, but was reborn a human. She was trying to help her sister by arranging the marriage, but her untimely death interfered. She tells him that the maid is near death and that he is the only one who can save her. He finds out where she is buried then the parrot woman then falls to the ground and flies as a crane to heaven. He wakes up, goes there, and opens the coffin and the maid is restored. He takes her to a nearby Buddhist monastery where he leaves her to heal. He returns, proposes, explains to his mother that he wants to marry a poor girl, and sends her to see the girl. The mother gives permission, and they are married. He is so grateful to the parrot that he buys and frees any that he sees.



**Hamilton, Mary (1991). *The Princess and the Dove*. From *Best-loved stories told at the National Storytelling Festival*. 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. Jonesborough, TN: National Storytelling Press.**

A princess sits by her bedroom window combing her hair and a dove steals her barrette. This happens twice more, with the dove taking a scarf and a comb. On the third event, she follows the dove that appears to wait for her and lead her on into the forest and to a clearing. A run-down hut sits there and out steps a handsome young man who tells her he is the dove since he is under a spell and only she can break it. He tells her she must sit in a chair by the window of the hut and watch him fly away and

wait there for a year, month, and day to release him. She does it, suffering sun, cold, and rain as well as animals living in her clothes.

He comes back and sees how damaged she is, spits on her, and leaves. She cries, sleeps, and then meets three older women who restore her beauty and promise her redemption. She is transported to a palace near the young man who has become king and the three women are her servants. He sees her, not knowing who she is, and wants her. She and the women set up a meeting that requires him to build a platform between the two palaces, stand still, and she will cross; instead, she pretends to be injured by the set up, is taken away, and rumors fly that she is badly injured. When word is out that she is well, he tries again. She sets up another trial, pretends to be injured, and makes him believe she is near death (all without really meeting her).

He tries one more time. She says he must build his coffin, go through the streets in it to her palace, and she will meet him. When he does it, she sees him and spits on him. He looks at her, recognizes her, and asks her forgiveness for his bad behavior. They decide to start over.



**Colum, Padraic, ed. (1989). *The Snowy Breasted Pearl (ballad)*. From *A treasury of Irish folklore: The stories, traditions, legends, humor, wisdom, ballads and songs of the Irish people*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Revised. New York: Kilkenny Press.**

A young man sings of a beautiful girl that he has wooed for a year and a day. He is willing to travel far just to see her, but he would rather die than not have her. He compares her to a white dove, points out that other, richer girls will take him, and says that all he wants is her.



**Colum, Padraic, ed. (1989). *She Moved Through the Fair (ballad)*. From *A treasury of Irish folklore: The stories, traditions, legends, humor, wisdom, ballads and songs of the Irish people*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Revised. New York: Kilkenny Press.**

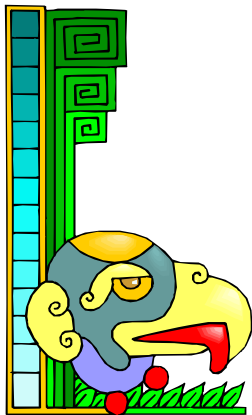
A young man speaks of his lover's excitement on their impending wedding. She reassures him that her parents won't mind that he's not rich.

He watches her walk away, through the fair, and compares her to the movement of the swan. She visits him late that night and once again speaks of their wedding.



**Herbert, George. *Easter Wings*. Harmon, William, ed. (1992). From The top 500 poems. New York: Columbia University Press.**

This poem of two wing-shaped stanzas speaks to God about man losing all that God gave him but asking that God help this person to rise like the lark and sing God's praises. He points out that he can soar better because of man's fall. He points out his personal sins and suffering and that he can fly with God's help to a better self.



## ANALYSIS



Birds have long been symbols in stories and literature. "From very early times there was a universal Indo-European belief that souls could take the form of birds. Latin *aves* meant both 'birds' and 'ancestral spirits,' or ghosts, or angels. (Walker 101)" In these stories and songs, we see birds used in many ways. *The Three Little Birds* and *Easter Wings* are the closest to the ancient symbolic connections with the birds appearing as metaphors for the soul or as helpful spirits. In *The Sparrow with the Split Tongue*, *Jorinda and Joringel*, and *The Waiting Maid's Parrot* the birds are also maidens, bewitched or reincarnated. They are fragile, easily caught, and beloved. The two from Asian countries especially have the girls similar to the ancient spirit as well as beautiful girls. In *The Snowy Breasted Pearl* and *She Moved Through the Fair*, the bird is a metaphor for the girl, beautiful and ethereal—perhaps even uncatchable. In a turnabout to the usual symbolic connection, *The Princess and the Dove* has the dove as a

young man, and a rude one at that. *The Seven Ravens* are transformed boys who are freed by their little sister. Finally, *The Golden Bird* shows us the most frequent use of birds in tales—that of a valuable, difficult to catch, and useful creature that often is also magical in some way.

Some typical characteristics of real birds come into these stories: flight, need to escape, kept/captured, fragility, desirable feathers/appearance, beautiful song/ability to speak human words. These qualities then are connected to the characters in the stories in some way. Many of the bewitched or transformed maidens are renowned for their beauty as humans, reflecting the striking beauty and grace of the bird. The exception to this is Jorinda who is beautiful and sings beautifully, while the nightingale she becomes is renowned for voice more than appearance. Even the young man who was a dove is strikingly handsome. The parrot speaks human speech to both the maiden and her lover, and the birds that appear when the children are cast into the water speak verses full of omens. The flight of these creatures draws other characters to them, like the golden bird, in addition to their beauty.

The caged bird is so much a metaphor for trapped souls, bodies, and desires that we see it in most of the stories in some way. The golden bird is so desirable that the king sends his three sons to get it and loses two in the process. Yet, when it is caged, it can be handled. Jorinda is caught by the witch and caged until freed by Joringel. The princess is the trapped one when she chooses to sit in the hut to free the handsome prince turned dove (a turnabout of the usual situation). The parrot only does her useful actions when she escapes and she scolds the maiden for trying to recapture her when she has been so helpful. Although, in reality, the maiden is the far more trapped soul in her servitude to the master. In many ways, the imprisoned queen is reflected in the little birds that follow her children, although she is not free as they are. Ironically, it takes the caged bird to remind the king to free her. The young man in the song *The Snowy Breasted Pearl* is trapped by his adoration of the maiden he describes as like a dove. His choices are limited by his desire for her and he is left with only death as a choice if she refuses him. In *Easter Wings*, the free flight of the bird is equated to the flight of a soul buoyed by God's love and support. In a slight twist on the trend, the sparrow is not caged by her situation but feels safe in it until the wife attacks her. The cage is not the danger.

Most of these works reflect Western sensibilities, although two pieces are Asian. Most are from Grimm's collections from German sources, two are Irish, one is Italian (*The Princess and the Dove*), and the poem is English. The two pieces from Asia, one Chinese and the other Japanese, show a slightly different approach to the bird symbolism. "The Chinese said women knew the secret of flying before men did. (Walker 101)" The Chinese story has the maiden reincarnated from parrot to girl and her

sister, still a parrot, attempting to help her have a good life. The Japanese story has the sparrow that becomes the old man's beloved pet leave and reveals herself as a mystical and beautiful maiden who provides a test of serious magnitude. Both show an acceptance of transformation and lack of explanation (no bewitchment is mentioned in either situation) that differs greatly from the Western pieces.

The four German stories and the Italian one reflect transformation by curse or spell, or the bird as spirit or object of magic involved in a spell or curse. The spell must usually be broken by trial or test, usually by a loved one. The Irish songs show the connection of beautiful and graceful birds to the spirits of beautiful women, and the mystical quality of the birds is revealed in the hints of death in both songs.

Many common elements of folklore appear in these stories. The Law of Three can be seen in many of the Western stories: *The Seven Ravens* has the daughter meet the sun, the moon, and the stars to help her find her brothers; *The Golden Bird* has three sons (also displaying the Law of Final Stress with the youngest as our hero) and three trials; *The Three Little Birds* has three children (also Law of Final Stress with the daughter being the agent of change) and three steps to the trial; *The Princess and the Dove* has three older women as helpmates and three trials for the king. The Law of Contrast is visible in *The Sparrow with the Split Tongue* when the characters of the old man and woman are introduced. He is good-natured and friendly while she is greedy and argumentative. He appears browbeaten by her so we are sympathetic to him. The Law of Two to a Scene is visible in *The Golden Bird* once the youngest son and the fox begin to interact. They are usually the only two in the scene that precedes a trial. The failure of the youth to follow the directions despite past experience provides the obvious need for growth in the character that keeps the audience following his adventures. The Law of Closing gives us the satisfactory punishment of the wife in *The Sparrow with the Split Tongue*, the brothers in *The Golden Bird*, the sisters in *The Three Little Birds*, and the witch in *Jorinda and Joringel*. Both Eastern and Western stories display these patterns, showing them to be more story-based than culture-based.



## SUMMARY

This project presented challenges most often in narrowing the material down to mostly the spiritual and symbolic. Birds are common elements in many folktales and ballads, frequently as creatures without spiritual or metaphoric emphasis. Many Native American and African tales

have wonderful birds in them, but these are mostly animal fables. I am most often fascinated by how birds reflect us, and I found that a more difficult collection to gather.

In addition, I had some difficulty locating any clear indexing that identified birds as metaphoric creatures. I most often relied on my own experience with story and metaphor to identify likely tales.

If I were putting together a school lesson, I probably would have focused on animal fables as a more visible and exciting collection. This particular collection is rather personal in its interest and definitely esoteric in its focus. If I allowed more research time, I can definitely collect more material and subcategorize it into motifs and emphases, allowing more varied cultural examples. This strikes me as a long-term collection for a bird-loving storyteller.



### **ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHIC MATERIALS**

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**Walker, Barbara G. (1983). The woman's encyclopedia of myths and secrets. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers.**

