

Literary Ornithology

Birds and Birding in American Literature

Prof. Dr. Caroline Rosenthal



Source: https://unsplash.com/photos/Lv_bMRV5xz4

In the summer term of 2020, Prof. Dr. Rosenthal taught a seminar called "Literary Ornithology: Birds and Birding in American Literature," examining the role birds and birdwatching have played in literature and culture from the romantic period until the present. Over the span of the semester, participants were asked to prepare written assignments and give presentations surrounding the theme of birds in literature and culture. In the following, you will find some exemplary content created by the students involved.

Journal Entry on Birdwatching

When I gave this journal entry a thought, I inevitably had to think of this one specific location: My boyfriend's family lives in a small rural village in a quite remote house with an enormous backyard garden, which offers the most perfect setting to observe some birds. Behind the house, they have a huge porch with some really comfortable seating facilities, and a little further away there is a little brook that flows into a pond. Every morning my boyfriend's mum tells me how exciting it was to spot all different kinds of birds having a bath in their brook. She keeps saying that the very first thing she does in the mornings is observing this spectacle in her backyard and that it fills her with great joy every single day. I have always been impressed by her knowledge about several different species and thought that I might give it a try one day myself.

Finally, one Sunday morning, I decided to get up quite early just to make sure that I will not be disturbed during my birdwatching exercise. I made myself comfortable on the porch, cuddled myself up in a blanket, leaned back, and actively focused my attention on the brook and pond in front of my eyes. I thought it would be a good idea to start my observation from a little distance in order to make sure not to impair the natural processes of the birds I expected to see. I immediately felt that this was the beginning of a warm summer day and I also noted that first rays of sunlight reflected on the water surface. I closed my eyes and saw that bubbling little brook right in front of me, I tried to release any disturbing thoughts. Through this moment of complete silence in my head concentrating only on these natural sounds in my surroundings, I was allowed to dive right into this birdwatching (or listening) meditation. What I realized then was that some birds were already actively chirping in the trees. I had left my eyes closed for a while when I finally recognized what a calming effect all of this had on me. Although I was not able to identify one single bird by its sound, I noticed differences between their chirps. I decided to open up my eyes and tried to follow the noises I perceived, but had no luck spotting any birds. At least not at the beginning. It did not take too long until the first bird finally approached the brook. I even was lucky enough to be able to identify this bird; it was a robin. To be honest, I could not see much of it from the distance, but its orange-red tiny little breast immediately caught my eyes and I decided to slowly get closer. This morning, I witnessed this little robin's morning routine; he sat down beside the brook and started his day with a bath in the stream of the brook. More birds approached (I could not identify them, except for a sparrow), but this little robin was not bothered by them even though some of the others were significantly bigger than he was. It seemed to me as if he cleaned himself indeed very carefully, every single part of his tiny body. I also noticed a playful interaction between all of the different birds I observed. Their chirps became even louder the more birds joined the "bathing party." I do not know why,

but I was keenly interested in the little robin's actions which is why I followed every single step of him. When he finished his cleaning procedure, he decided to go on with foraging some food. It was time for breakfast, I thought. What I observed then was quite remarkable. The bird flew straight up into a tree which served as a look-out tower for him. From there, he had a better view of possible food resources in the area.



He jumped from branch to branch until he must have spotted something. The robin landed on the ground and now somehow jumped from one spot to the other. Instead of walking, which would have been a little struggle for him due to his tininess, I guess, he hopped like a little rabbit through the grass hoping to find something to eat. I was really amused by this. Just when my boyfriend came to see me in the garden, saying "good morning", I realized how much time had passed during my birdwatching mediation.

Time flew by so fast and I was so fascinated by the happenings in the backyard and especially by the actions of the little robin that I totally forgot time and space. It really was an inspiring experience to just concentrate on my natural environment and I started my daily routine in a much more relaxed and calm way. After all of this, I decided to dedicate my new little friend a watercolor painting and I have also decided to repeat such kind of exercise more frequently.

Birdwatching Entry:

In Search of the Common Kestrel

Chirping, cheeping, tweeting – bird song fills the air, surrounds us everywhere. It is the background noise to our daily undertakings, the melodious communication of another species. Yet, it often goes unnoticed and is drowned out by the tumult of our ordinary routines. However, once your attention is brought to the inherent beauty and complexity of birds, you cannot but appreciate and acknowledge the little feathered creatures. Therefore, it goes without saying that through this seminar I have become more attuned to the rich bird life surrounding us. In the

beginning, I was noticing more and more different kinds of bird song, trying to consciously take them in. Then, I was getting accustomed to look out for the birds making those sounds. One day, I was looking out the window of my bedroom, when I suddenly noticed quite a large bird sitting on top of an ornament on the building opposite of mine. Having only little to no knowledge of different types of birds, I took a wild guess that it either has to be a hawk or buzzard. After some research, I came to the conclusion that the bird must be a common kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*).

According to ornithologists, the common kestrel is one of the most frequently encountered birds of prey throughout the world, belonging to the group of falcons (AD).¹ In 2007, it was even announced “Bird of the Year” by the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union, Germany (NABU).² The common kestrel is recognized by its light gray and chestnut-brown plumage covered in dark brown spots. Depending on the gender of the bird, its tail is brown with black spots, when female, and dark gray with less black spots, when male. Determined to observe a common kestrel for my entry, I decided that it would be a worthwhile idea to make a drawing of one; as I thought that this would help me to thoroughly study its detailed appearance and thus enable me to tell it apart from other species, when outside. With this in mind, one sunny afternoon at the beginning of June, I ventured out into nature, hoping to spot a common kestrel in the woods.

¹ <https://www.beautyofbirds.com/commonkestrels.html>

² <https://www.nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/aktionen-und-projekte/vogel-des-jahres/2007-turmfalke/index.html>



Once I was surrounded by luscious treetops and seasonal flowers, I tried to direct all my attention to the wildlife around me. At first, I found it rather difficult to solely concentrate on the birds and their bird song. Whereas I did notice some flapping movements from the corners of my eyes from time to time, most of the time, I found my thoughts wandering off and my eyes drifting along the landscape. Only when some small bird landed a couple of meters away from me, I locked my eyes upon the little creature. Not trying to move, I kept still and quiet, observing every move of the bird. It was on the hunt for food, pacing up and down the meadow, randomly pecking at some blades of grass. Occasionally, the bird looked up and then kept doing its thing. Although I do not have much experience with birdwatching, I was able to identify the bird as a blackbird. Shortly after, more blackbirds joined the little one, all hopping along the area. Amidst, I heard some crows crying, but I only could see them hovering in the far distance. Then, it was totally quiet again. The blackbirds were still there but smaller in number this time. One of them was arranging its feathers with its beak, which was then followed by a short fluttering of its feathers. As time passed, I spotted a couple of squirrels running up and down trees but could not see any other birds. Every now and then, I could hear the chirping of some, however, I could not tell where it was coming from. Resultingly, as I was not able to detect most of the birds by eye, I decided to try by ear and focus on sound, making use of my guide.

In preparation for my birdwatching, I had searched for some tips and most of them said that birding is best done with some sort of guide. Therefore, I confess that I installed an app on my phone that would allow me to record bird song, which then in return would automatically be assigned to a specific species. Now, I thought would be a good time to record some of the chirping – to my surprise, the app identified all sound belonging to blackbirds. Slowly but surely, I was beginning to realize that the odds of me seeing a common kestrel were quite low. Nonetheless, my fascination with birds and their behavior was growing by the minute. I was completely immersed in their observation, and in contrast to my initial struggles, I now was able to keep my focus whenever a bird crossed my sight. Towards the end of my trip, I saw and heard some chaffinches flying from one treetop to another (I could tell they were chaffinches because of their rust-red underparts – my app confirmed the sound). They, however, did not seem to take notice of me; just like the pigeons, which I spotted on my way home. Once I arrived back at my apartment, I felt a sense of joy in that I had recognized various kinds of birds. Thus, I took the decision to go birdwatching more often. As for the common kestrel, I still see it occasionally, when looking out the window, either circling in the air or sitting on top of the building where I first had seen it – just so it then can vanish back into the woods again...

Bird Watching Journal Entry- Close Encounters of the Feathered Kind

(Sallona Ramesh)

My favourite thing about living in a small city like Jena is being able to find nature all around me. Unlike my former home in a concrete jungle, nature is never all that far away here. It can be found on the horizons in the silhouette of the hills, in the trees outside my window and occasionally, even on my balcony. In early spring I was greeted by the arrival of a surprise visitor on my balcony. I was first alerted to its presence by a continuous stream of incessant chirping. When I went onto my balcony to investigate I was greeted by a rapid flurry of movement and then completely stillness and silence. I moved slowly so as not to scare it and tried to find the source of the sound. After a few moments, something moved inside a laundry basket that had been sitting out on the balcony. A tiny chick peeked out at me.



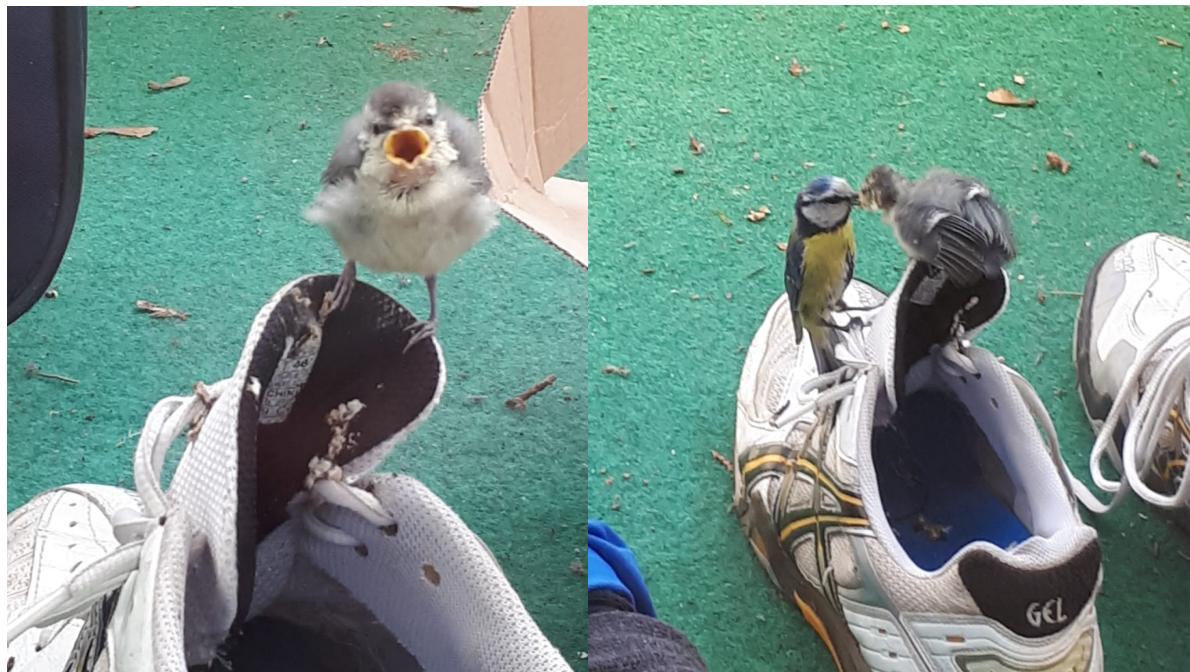
A short amount of research on the internet yielded the name of its species, a Eurasian blue tit. Once the chick got used to my presence, she continued moving about chirping incessantly. She had feathers on her body that looked somewhat damp and she occasionally fluffed them up to look about twice as large as she actually was. Her face had what can only be described as a grumpy expression, despite efforts not to anthropomorphise. Although she had feathers she was certainly too young to fly, instead hopping around from one perch to another. Using information from the internet I placed her age at approximately 10-15 days, old enough to have feathers but not yet ready to use them.



After a few hours of watching her through the window, I began to grow worried that she had been abandoned. Her incessant chirping seemed to be yielding no response. Further research on the internet informed me that human interference reduces the chances of long term survival for a baby bird and that the responsible thing to do is simply to leave her alone. As the baby bird was extremely small and potential fodder for predators, I resolved to keep a close eye on her from inside the house (and a ear out listening for her constant chirping). She seemed to be enjoying the warmth and cover of the full laundry basket and was using my boyfriend's size 47 shoe as a den of sorts, retreating into it when afraid. Clearly, she had claimed the balcony as her own and we respectfully remained indoors, leaving our paraphernalia outside for her amusement.

All of a sudden the chirping increased in frequency, becoming extremely loud and high pitched. The chick was perched on the tongue of my boyfriend's shoe, her feathers fluffed up, positively quivering. There was a sudden flash of blue and a flurry of activity too quick to see and then everything was back to normal. The chick had quietened down and retreated into the shoe. I didn't know what to make of this. Was a parent bird feeding her after all or had I just witnessed a close-call with a predator?

The next morning my question was answered for me when around 6:30am I heard the same tell-tale high frequency chirping and fluttering. I vaulted out of bed and all-but pressed my face against the balcony window. It was a parent bird, painstakingly feeding the chick out of its own mouth with great care. The whole thing happened so quickly that the parent was there and gone in a matter of seconds. Luckily the scene repeated every few hours and after a few attempts I managed to capture it on photo and video.



Now relieved that the chick wasn't abandoned after all, I was thrilled to have a literal window into this incredible scene of nature. Having completely given up use of our balcony and resigned ourselves to washing out lots of bird poop from our laundry in the near future, our temporary roommate quickly became a daily delight. After a few days she found her wings and flew the nest (or the shoe, as the case may be) sometime when we weren't around to witness her first flight. While we miss her constant chirping, we feel a special connection to any blue tit we spot in the wild.

Expert Group – Birds in Pop Culture



Birds in Popular Culture

Presented by:
Sallona Ramesh
Mirjana Milić
Oliver Koske
Luisa Wöllner

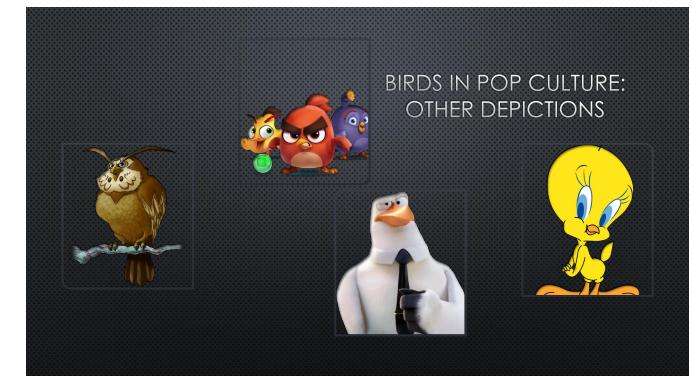
Birds in Pop Culture: The Development and Use of Bird Archetypes



PARROTS IN POPULAR CULTURE

Talkative
Duplicitious
Spies

Birds in Pop Culture: Depicting Captivity



Birds in Pop Culture: Content for Children

Bird Imagery Targeting Younger Audiences

Birds in Pop Culture: Conclusion

- Birds can be depicted in Pop Culture in a traditional or a subversive manner
- The depictions vary from naturalistic to symbolic
- The tone of depictions depends on the genre, the message, and the intended audiences
- The provided examples are from different genres of: Films, Television Series, Video Games, Cartoons, Comic Books and Music
- Recommendation for further research: Memes, Jokes, Commercials, Body Art, Brands, Logos, Mascots...



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