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## **Avian Literature: Poetical Representation of Birds in Romantic Poetry**

**Dr. Ahamed Musfar P.M.**  
Assistant Professor of English,  
Calicut University Centre, Kadmat,  
U.T. of Lakshadweep.

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### **Abstract:**

Poets always have a fascination towards our feathered friends. They employ birds for expressing their inner feelings and emotions in different ways. Birds have always held significance in human lives. This paper analyses poems of selected typical Romantic poets as they are aimed to accentuate extreme emotion and thoughts. Poets, Philosopher's and writers uses different types of birds for expression. Interestingly, birds are also referred to their exuberant and vibrant colors which reflect the brighter side of life. Article brings out a comparative analysis of how birds have been referred in various contexts by various romantic poets in English literature.

**Keywords: Imagery, Birds, Emotions, Feelings, Identity.**

Poet's reveries have always hankered after wings. Tracing back the bird imagery, takes us to ancient Greeks, Persians, Hebrews and Egyptians. Birds are often representative of unequalled spirituality due to their ability to hover and hum. Birds are depicted by most poets to represent the humanitarian concepts in a better way.

Recurrent usage of bird imagery can be seen throughout the history of literature. Most of the symbolism and imagery used in literature especially in poetry are associated with birds and wings but new connotations have been added by conferring new meanings to the words. Ancient religions were in reverence of birds that appeared to fly so close to the sun. Many people believed that birds such as eagles, vultures and hawks were gods. Birds also represented as an embodiment of love, peace and affection. The correlation of man with nature is connected with the image of birds. When Romantic poets compared 'caged bird' to human beings denied their

right to freedom, renaissance poets used it in their love poetry. Some other poets saw birds such as the nightingale as a natural representation of the poets' condition and inspiration human beings and nature have always been interconnected and referred to, especially in the context of literature.

Poets, Philosopher's and writers use different types of birds for expression. Interestingly, birds are also referred to their exuberant and vibrant colors which reflect the brighter side of life. However quite contrary to the poets descriptive details of birds there is another way of analyzing and differentiating one bird from another. In fact this has been illuminated upon by one poet. Some of the basic to complex references about birds are seen in the works of poets who have used nature as a source to express their feelings like describing the color of the eye of a bird to intimate details of the birds eating habits to the comparison of how humans look upon the bird for a number of reasons.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century poets like Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Mary Oliver and a few others of the American literature of Romantic age, influenced other writers and poets about nature. They were able to use nature in the form of poetry to convey to others the efficacies of nature and its flora and fauna some of the common birds which we generally come across are Doves, Eagles, Vultures, Sparrows and Ravens. Birds embodied everything humanity failed to apprehend. Renaissance poets used bird imagery in their love poetry to express their hopeless love. Nightingale in their poems were mostly represented love sick man. Contrary to this most of the romantic poets inspired by the idea that birds sing for its own sake.

This article discusses the imagery used in the poetries of John Keats, P B Shelly, S T Coleridge and Edgar Allen Poe. Birds have always held significance in human lives. The poetry of Keats is characterized by sensual imagery, most notably in the series of odes. This is typical Romantic poets as they are aimed to accentuate extreme emotion through an emphasis on natural imagery. Keats ode begins with his feelings which are mostly depicted as drowsy lethargic and sad. He wants to disappear, yet bring the bird with him. The reader may interpret that the poet is in despair, yet he wants to the companion of that bird. Poets mental state is depicted in the line "where but to think is to be full of sorrow". He says much in this line about the burden of being

thinking human. The mind is a gift but when burdened with sorrow, you may not escape from it. He cannot help to think, hence withdrew from reality.

The line “Away! Away! For I Will fly to thee. One the viewless wings of poesy” (*Ode to Nightingale* 936), he uses the bird analogy of flight and couples it with his poetic ability as a means of escape for his pain. Stanza five reflects on his ability to enjoy nature in effective life.

*I cannot see flowers are at my feet,*

*Nor what soft incense hangs upon the thoughts,*

*But in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet (Ode to Nightingale 936)*

The feelings of hearing the songs of Nightingale is portrayed here but he cannot see the bird that sits in heights and at the night he smells the beautiful fragrance of flowers he cannot saw them as it is under his feet and also its night. John Keats was a poet who worshipped beauty of nature in his poetry. Natural objects lively and beautiful in his poem however he does not treat them just as lifeless natural objects. Rather he mixed his own emotion and creates a personal attachment with them. His personal feelings such as happiness, sadness, hope and frustration are also conveyed through his poetry. Keats expressed a desire to escape from reality. Which cannot tolerate. His utmost most wish to fly into a dreamland is also lined in his poem.

S T Coleridge presented nature in a very natural way. He had a brilliant sense of imagination and narrative skills that could imagine the most supernatural thing and then describe it in the most natural way. In the poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” he described the life of a Mariner who had killed an Albatross and then suffered immensely for killing it. The whole poem is based upon the reaction of killing the Albatross. Albatross is not a way of escaping but a holy and beautiful creation of God. It brings joy to the sailors. The sailors who have to spend many lonely days within the sea during their voyage. So they often feel very lonely and do not get the opportunity to see any sign of life around them for days.

*At length did cross an Albatross*

*Through the fog it came;*

*As if it had been a Christian soul,*

*We hailed it in God's name.*

*(Lyrical Ballads 549)*

Sailors feel happy and hopeful when they see Albatross as land is near to them. Albatross becomes a companion of them. They feed him and play with it. Here the bird becomes a way to escape from harsh loneliness around him. The mariner first commits a sin and then suffer for it. He repents for it pray to God to forgive him. Coleridge through this poem conveys a moral that we need to show love and kindness to the creation of God.

*And a good south wind sprung up behind;*

*The Albatross did follow,*

*And every day, for food or play,*

*Came to the mariner's hollo ! (Lyrical Ballads 549)*

The other mariners felt horrified when came to know that the mariner has killed the Albatross. *They pursue for salvation.*

*And I had done a hellish thing,*

*And it would work ;em woe:*

*For all avered, I had killed the bird*

*That made the breeze to blow. (Lyrical Ballads 549)*

Poets unlike other writers reflects their own life in their writings. When Keats was bedridden he was quite sure that his days are limited. Thus he has used the Nightingale as symbols of death. The Nightingale is a common bird with an uncommon sound which is rich, loud, mellow and melodious. It has stamina and sings with an eerie natural beauty that reverberates like a chord through and Asian poetry. Its song is strong and beautiful and compelling. The nightingale has always had tremendous metaphysical and symbolic power. It seems persistent song. Poets, who are often nocturnal creatures, have especially identified with 'spring's messenger, the sweet voiced Nightingale. They have also noted its difference from us. The nightingale sings during the day as well as the night, but poets have especially praised its night music, its mournful tones and its joyous sound. In his magisterial defense of poetry, Shelly establishes the connection between

the poet and the Nightingale. The singing of Nightingale becomes a metaphor for writing poetry here, and listening to that bird becomes a metaphor for reading it. One of the romantic premises of Shelley's metaphor is that the poet sings in 'solitude' without any consideration for an unseen musician. They are physically removed from each other, and yet they are brought into mysterious relationship Keats also makes a good balance between sensation and thought. We can find extraordinary sensuous passages, as at the beginning his poem. By using the word 'sense' and makes the readers feel this numbness too. The poet later deals with the problems of human life, as in stanza three:

*'Here where men sit and hear each other groan;*

*Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,*

*Where youth grows pale and spectra-thin and dies;*

*Where but to think is to be full of sorrow; (Ode to Nightingale 936)*

Contrary to this Coleridge uses moral teachings of Christianity by emphasizing the concept of sin and redemption. The deep analysis of the poem evokes didactic elements of the poem.

*He prayeth best, who loveth best*

*All things both great and small;*

*For the dear God who loveth us,*

*He made and loveth all (Lyrical Ballads 549)*

Shelley and Keats derived poetic inspiration from fowls, nature's winged songstresses. Both Keats and Shelley use the birds in their poems as metaphors for their speakers, differencing personal desires. Shelley's "To a Skylark" addresses it by calling 'blithe Spirit'. Skylark is not just a bird here but a bird come "from Heaven, or near it". Skylark is an angel or God since it may be from heaven. Although it is unseen still people believe in it. Likewise faith in God is also necessary though the religious texts has just mentioned in it. Speaker says to the Skylark, "What thou art we know not". At the same time, people do not actually know what God is. Terms like omniscient and omnipotent are often used to denote him. Similes such as "like a high-born maiden", "sweet as love-which overflows her bower" describes what the bird is. Speaker also

compares the bird to “a rose embowered in its own green leaves”. God’s love is also questioned by asking “what love of thine own kind? What ignorance is pain” and answered in the way ‘Thou lovest –but ne’er knew love’s sad satiety’. Even if mankind were able to avoid feeling hate, pride, fear, and suffering, the negative aspects of humanity, the speaker seems unable to imagine mankind achieving the same rapture as the skylark. Poet’s desires also portrayed when he says:

*“Teach me half the gladness*

*That thy brain must know,*

*Such harmonious madness*

*From my lips would flow” (To a Skylark 101)*

In the poem *Ode to the Nightingale* also we can see the speaker is fantasizing himself having the ability to escape the shackles of his human life, and enter the natural world represented by the forest by stating: with thee”. The idea of immortality is conveyed “though were not born for death, immortal Bird!” The inevitability of death finally proclaimed by the speaker “Adieu? The fancy cannot cheat so well.”

Another romantic classic narrative poem ‘The Raven’ by Edgar Allen Poe uses the imagery of a raven which reciprocates the inner feelings of the poet itself. This poem was noted for its rendered language and supernatural elements. The mysterious visits of raven to the narrator’s room on a stormy night is exquisitely narrated in the poem.

*But the fact that I was napping, and so*

*Gently you came tapping,*

*Tapping at my chamber door,*

*That I scarce was sure I heard you”-here*

*I opened wide the door;-*

*Darkness there and nothing more. (The Raven 2)*

Raven depicted here as a quintessence of hell and the devil. When the poet opens the door he see nothing but darkness. He is frightened by the inevitable fatality as he is disturbed by his fate and mourning his dead lover. His own personal hell, a dark is shown here by the visit of a raven who comes tapping gently.

*Deep into that darkness peeping, long I*

*Stood there wondering, fearing,*

*Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal*

*Ever dared to dream before. (The Raven 4)*

Desperate hope for a response from the raven and imminent cataclysm is narrated here by conveying the experience of the narrator. When the raven repeatedly says “never more”, though it evokes fear in him he rationalizes that the raven has nothing to do with his own hopeless state and trying to figure out what all that means.

*“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!-*

*Prophet still, if bird or devil!- (The Raven 6)*

Poet anxiously asking whether the raven is evil. The negative responses received by raven surprises the narrator and make him understand that his soul will never experience happiness again.

*And my soul from out that shadow that*

*Lies floating on the floor*

*Shall be lifted nevermore! (The Raven 6)*

This poetry is a best example for how even the shadow of bird can be used as an imagery in poetry. The shadow of the raven symbolizes sadness or the soul of the narrator which is never going to be happy. Poems end by creating ambiguity among the readers by evoking thoughts in them whether the narrator has dead or not. Although the poem indicates that the soul of the narrator ‘shall be lifted nevermore, the question then how a dead man narrated a poem can be raised here.



Keats and Shelley are poetic Nightingales, as they have derived solace from composing poetry. They narrate their own personal beliefs through speakers. While Shelley may have had atheistic tendencies, he was still knowledgeable about Christianity. In 'To a Skylark', Shelley may have used the Skylark as a metaphor for Christ or as a metaphor for the natural goodness he desired for himself and others. Differ from this Keats was preoccupied with human suffering and he used the Nightingale as a metaphor for escaping the mortal coil that is life. Coleridge urges to move away from sin and talks about the importance of redemption. Likewise Allen Poe use the image of a bird to narrate a man's isolation inside his own chamber and the mental trauma he experienced.

Writers in this way employ birds for many purposes for expressing their inner feelings and emotions in a different way. Birds elevate the expressive speaker in romantic poetry and yielding new interpretations to them. In fact they use birds as a persona as they could not get any freedom to express their emotions. The qualities of birds not only used as symbols of superstitious beliefs or to convey a didactic element but intensively for reflecting the thoughts and inner feelings of the poets. Through poetry they could fly higher, sing louder and wander around the world as they wished.

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