

**Purdue University**  
**Purdue e-Pubs**

---

Purdue Languages and Cultures Conference

Purdue Languages and Cultures Conference 2016

---

Mar 4th, 6:00 PM - 6:30 PM

# The Speaking Birds: a Cognitive Approach to the Symbolic Representation of Animals in Literature

Valentina Concu

*Purdue University*, [vconcu@purdue.edu](mailto:vconcu@purdue.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/plcc>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

---

Concu, Valentina, "The Speaking Birds: a Cognitive Approach to the Symbolic Representation of Animals in Literature" (2016).  
*Purdue Languages and Cultures Conference*. 4.

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/plcc/purduelanguagesandculturesconference2016/LITSessionOne/4>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

## **The Speaking Birds: A Cognitive Approach to the Symbolic Representation of Animals in *The Saga of Volsung* and *Brother Grimm's Cinderella***

Valentina Concu, *Purdue University*

As Mark Turner claims in his work *Reading Minds*, “the human person is a patter of activity in the mind and in its brain” (Turner 13). This would imply that the human being is constantly “cognitively active”, since he or she is steadily subjected to a continuous flow of stimuli from the surrounding environment, which are elaborated, processed and stored in forms of concepts and thoughts. Languages are preferred places to express such concepts and thoughts, and language structures and their organization in every communicative activity can be considered as a reflection of how the human mind works, perceives the world and expresses such perceptions. While some concepts are expressed without any particular linguistic resource, others are conveyed through more complex and elaborated structures, which formations are the outcome of specific cognitive processes, like association, analogies and connections between different domains. The large number of symbolic expressions and metaphors in our language is a sign that “they are indispensable for the human mind” (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 11) in order to understand the world around us. Symbolic language and metaphors are often used in every day interactions, which reveals how important and strictly imbedded in human communication those two elements are in

our society. “We cannot know a language without knowing its everyday metaphors” (Turner 15), and the same happens also with the variety of symbols used.

Paul Hopper (Hopper 144) sees grammar as a bi-product of communication, and to some extent, language symbols and metaphors could be also accounted as a product of communication’s needs, used to express concepts using elements from different domains and shared in a specific society. The Roman philosopher Cicero claimed “as clothes were first invented to protect us against cold, and afterward began to be used for the sake of adornment and dignity, so the metaphorical employment of words began because of poverty, but was brought into common use for the sake of entertainment” (Feder Kittay 1). However, metaphors and symbols are more than language enrichment. They enrich communication and its effectiveness, combining elements from different domains, which can be relatively distant from each other. How metaphors are related to our society is also implied by the fact they change with the time and new ones emerge from usage: the well known metaphor about the brain being a computer, for example, was created as soon as computers became a part of our everyday life, so that the connection with the brain could be understood and introduced in every day conversations. The processes involved in the implementation of such new linguistic figures resemble also the processes of inputs and feedbacks implied in the creation of new grammatical structures and new lexicon in the language. To become a fix part of the language, the communication must be successful and able to convey understandable messages. That is why symbols and

metaphors are usually created using elements that are already shared by the community and, often they are a part of everyday life, so that the message can be understood.

Even more than computers, animals have always been a constant presence in the history of our civilization and their countless representations in art; literature and religious testify their essential role across cultures. Animals, even with some differences regarding their species, are part of human life, and for this reason they are an ideal source to coin metaphors and forge symbolic language, like body parts or colors, which are also commonly used in numerous languages for the same purpose.

Animals are used to create metaphors and symbols, in which their specific features, their behavior (or perceived behaviors<sup>1</sup>) are linked with elements belonging to a different domain. Really common is, for example, the humanization of animals, a process in which human specific capacities are transferred to other beings that belongs to different species. One of them is the ability to speak a human language, ability that is assigned to different kinds of animals and not just to a specific one. The connections between different domains are normally made through mental association, and when these associations are frequently used, they become fixed and accepted within that particular speaking community and becomes symbols able to convey ideas and improve communication.

---

<sup>1</sup> It was believed that the nightingale sang just during the night, while scientific studies demonstrated that it is able to sing during the day as well.

“Of all wild animals the birds has always been closest to human kind because so much of its life can be readily observed and appreciate. Flight and songs make birds exceptionally noticeable in every sort of environment”(Lutwack X). Birds are, for example, involved in the myth of the foundation of Rom, when the two brothers, Romolo and Remo, interpreted as a premonitory sign the number of vultures they were able to see the day that they decided to start to build a new city: although Remo sees the birds first, Romolo will see double the amount (twelve instead of six), which will prophecy his victory on his brother, who he will kill the same day.

Birds have always been a part of the human life; some of them live really close to humans and their homes, showing a really high capacity of adaptation to different environments and to the modernization of our society. For these reasons, birds were linguistically used for the creation of symbols and metaphorical association, which were also largely implemented in literature. “Familiarity and transcendence have given birds a wider range of meaning and symbol in literature than any other animal. The resemblance of their activity to common patterns of human family behavior makes them exceptionally suitable for anthropomorphic imaginary that links man to the common forms of nature” (Ibid, XI). In his work “Birds in literature”, Leonard Lutwack depicts the way this particular kind of winged animals were used in poetry and narrative. He points out the specific features of birds that captured the fantasy of poets and writers over the history: flying, singing and migrating. The depiction of fantastic creatures, like angels or winged horses, includes

really often birds-like wings, with a rich plumage and different colors, the same ones found in nature. The Greek mythological story of Icarus also includes the construction of the same kind of wings, although his coming too close to the sun will condemn him to death.

The capacity to fly, together with their ability to sing, put birds in a special place in literary works, in which they serve as inspiration and as resources for the writing. One of the most famous birds of poetry is the nightingale, which inspired the minds of many writers already from ancient times because of its astonishing ability to sing. The Greek story about Philomena, a young woman raped by her brother-in-law, who cut out her tongue so that she could tell anyone what happened to her, can be considered one of the first poetic implementations of birds (Ibid 2). Philomena managed to inform her sister weaving her story on a tapestry. As revenge, both sisters killed the son of Tereus, the man who raped Philomena, cooked his body and offered to him as a banquet. As soon as he discovered what the women did, he tried to kill them, but then the gods decided to intervene and transform everyone birds.

Philomena's sister was the one transformed into a nightingale, while in the Roman tradition, this happened to Philomena. Lutwarck claim that this difference may lie in the willingness to explain the sadness of the singing of such birds, while for the Greeks the fact that Philomena could not talk, made impossible even for the gods to change her into a nightingale (Ibid 3). The transformation into birds doesn't seem to make justice to any of the parts involved in the story, and the ability of birds to fly away

may represent the willing of the gods to solve the situation making every one disappear.

Other than the capacity of singing, which can be considered as one of the main features responsible for the success in literature of birds, the migrations' flows that signalize the changing of the seasons were also used as an inspirational motive for narration and poetry. The migratory circle is usually identified with the human condition: "The unfailing rhythms of migration, song and silence, nesting and fledging, have supplied poets with easily comprehended symbols of the circle of life and death that all nature seems to suggest" (Ibid 24). The departure of the birds and the silence caused by their departure is also an inspiring motive for writers: "The departure of migrants and the suffering of resident birds supply metaphors for the melancholy sense of change and impending death that human begin to feel with the onset of darker days and unpleasant weather" (Ibid 28). Birds and their life's pace are associated to the flow of nature and the winter and its immobility, in particularly, with the absence of their songs.

Birds are not just seen as symbols for the passing of the yearly seasons, but they are also used often as a figure in which poets and writers can identify themselves and their creative activities. This metaphorical overlapping with the writer is related to the capacity of birds to sing, a capacity also attributed to poets and writers. Their flying is also seen as a symbol of the writers' ability to escape from their every day's life through their verses. One of the most symbolic overlaps of this kind is

Baudelaire's poem, *L'Albatros*, where the flying of the albatross is used a metaphor for the escape of the poets' mind from normality and everyday life<sup>2</sup>.

In the literary depictions discussed till this point, birds are often merely object of descriptions and passive presences in the writers' minds, in which they can identify themselves, their activities and the natural flow of the years. However, some texts reserve them a more active role in the narration, role often crucial for the main figures in the stories.

These literary works are: *The Saga of the Volsungs*, the *Poetic Edda*, Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs* and the Brothers Grimm's version of *Cinderella*.

Even though with some differences, these texts contain the representation of birds as wise and active part of nature. They interact with the protagonist from their privileged positions, high trees and plants, which implies that they have the possibility to observe the surroundings from a higher perspective than humans. Since birds spend a lot of time lying on high spots, and they can also fly, cover long distances and reach far places in short times, they are able to provide the protagonists with wise and accurate advices.

The *Saga of the Volsungs* is an Old Norse poem, wrote in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which narrates the events related to the story of the Volsungs clan. The sources of the unknown author of this work are prevalent oral and also contained in the poetic *Edda*. They were also used as inspiration for a large number of works, like the *Ring's Circle*

---

<sup>2</sup>Charles Baudelaire, *The Poems and Prose Poems of Charles Baudelaire with an Introductory Preface by James Huneker*. ed. James Huneker (2011- Kindle Edition).



of Richard Wagner or the almost hundred years old movie by Friz Lang, *The Nibelungs*. This epic story “recounts runic knowledge, princely jealousy, betrayals, unrequired love, the vengeance of a barbarian queen, greedy schemes of Attila the Hun, and the mythic deeds of the dragon slayers, Sigurd the Volsung”<sup>3</sup>. The main protagonist will be able to interact with birds and understand their language. In this particular case, the mutual intelligibility is possible because Sigurd, after slaying the dragon Fafnir, tastes its blood with his fingers. The acquisition of this capacity is depicted as a sort of magical ritual, even though fortuitous and not directly wanted by the protagonist:

“Then Sigurd cut the heart out of the serpent with the sword called Ridill. Regin drunk Fafnir’s blood and said: Grant me one request, a trifle for you. Go to the fire with the heart, roast it, and give it to me to eat.” Sigurd went and roasted Fafnir’s heart on a spit. And when the juice foamed out he tested it with his finger to see wherever it was done. He stuck his finger in his mouth. And when the blood from the serpent’s heart touched his tongue, he could understand the speech of birds. He heard the nuthatches chirping in the brush near him.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Jess Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. (London: University of California Press, 1990) Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

In the poetic *Edda*, the narration of the episode is quite similar, but this time the fortuity of the event is highlighted by the fact that Sigurd burned his fingers while roasting the heart of the dragon for Regin, and just because of that is able to drink the powerful blood:

Sigurd took Fafnir's heart and roasted it in a spit. When he thought that it was cooked enough and the blood frothed out, he touched to it to find out wherever it was one. It burned him and he put his finger in his mouth. Then Fafnir's heart blood touched his tongue, and he understood the speech of the birds.

5

In both cases the capacity to understand the birds' language is depicted as an extraordinary skill, accessible only through the ingestion of the blood of the heart of a dragon. As soon as Sigurd understands the birds talking, he hears them discussing and commenting what is happening around him:

"There sits, Sigurd, roasting Fafnir's heart. Better he should eat it himself", said a bird. "Then he would be wiser than any man". Another said: "there lies Regin, who wants to betray the one who trusts him." Then a third spoke: "He should strike Regin's head off; then he alone would control the huge store of gold." Then a fourth spoke "Sigurd would be wise to

---

<sup>5</sup> *Poems of the Elder Edda (The Middle Ages Series)*, trans. Patricia Terry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990)

follow their advice. Afterwards he should ride to Fafnir's den and take the magnificent hoard of gold which is there, and then ride up to Hinderfell, where Brynhild sleeps. There we will find great wisdom. He would be wise to take your advice and consider his own needs. I suspect a wolf where I see a wolf's ears". Then a fifth said "He is not wise as I though if he spares Regin after having killed his brother. " Then a sixth spoke: "It would be a wise course if Sigurd killed Regin and took the treasure for himself."<sup>6</sup>

The six birds involved in this episode are aware of the magic power of the heart of the dragon and of the malevolent intentions of Regin. He is indeed playing to kill Sigurd and take the treasure that Fafnir was guarding. The birds also know about Brynhild and her wisdom, and suggest to Sigurd to go and find her, so he will be able to find wisdom and prosperity. The birds give him clear suggestions (he has to kill Regin, take the gold of Fafnir and go and find Brynhild) saving his life from Regin. They don't talk directly to the hero and they formulate their thoughts in the form of advise, also using sometimes modal verbs in conditional, communicating in a distant way their opinions about the events ("he would be wiser", "he is not as wise as I though if he..."). The hero follows those suggestions without any hesitation or doubts. His trustful behavior towards the birds recalls the perception of these animals in the

---

<sup>6</sup>Jess Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. (London: University of California Press, 1990) Kindle Edition.

society: their ability to fly, to travel long distances and to observe from high spots like trees are associated with wisdom and sapience. They are perceived as reliable advisors and they will save Sigurd's life, and for this reason they are seen and used as a symbol for these elements.

In the *Edda*, the birds play a really similar role and give Sigurd advices that will save his life as well. The space that the author reserves to the birds is larger than they have in the Saga and their participation to the events is depicted in two different parts. In the first one, the seven birds (one more than the birds in the Saga) are focused on saving Sigurd's life, warning him against Regin and pointing out how dangerous could be for the protagonist to spare his life:

“There sits Sigurd stained with blood;

Fafnir's heart he roasts in the fire.

I would call the prince wise and prudent

if he himself ate the gleaming heart.”

Another said:

“There lies Regin plotting revenge –

he wants to trick the boy who trusts him.

The evil smith speaks in crooked words,

blaming Sigurd for his brother's death.”

A third said:

“Cut off his head! Send that hoary wizard

straight down to Hell!

Why should Sigurd share the treasure

Fafnir left in his lair?"

A fourth said:

He would understand how to act wisely,

if he could have your counsel, sisters,

to watch out for himself and rejoice the raven –

I expect the wolf when I see his ears.”

A fifth said:

“He is not so wise, this mighty warrior –

he doesn't look like a war-lord to me

if he lets Regin leave this place

when he has been Fafnir's bane.”

The sixth says:

“ He will be stupid if he spares

so foul a foe;

Regin lies here longing to destroy him –

what makes Sigurd so blind!”

The seventh said:

“Shorter by a head send the frost – hearted giant

far from his red-gold rings!

Sigurd would have the hoard of Fafnir,  
posses the prize alone.”<sup>7</sup>

Like in Saga, the information that Sigurd gets from the birds will save his life from Regin, who was plotting to kill Sigurd and take Fafnir’s gold. Another similarity between both texts is one of the comments of the birds: *I suspect a wolf where I see wolf’s ears/I expect the wolf when I see his ears*. The presence of this line suggests another symbolic association. This time the animals involved are wolves. The birds are not only aware of the events happening among humans, but they also are careful observers of the behavior of other animals. The wolf is really often depicted as a negative figure (Lopez 266), even though it is a female wolf that guaranteed the survivor of the founders of the Italian city of Rom. In this particular case the wolf is depicted as a dangerous animal. Other than this, this particular line wants probably to warn about the naive and blind trust that someone can have in someone else, even though the visual appearances clearly suggest the contrary. Although Regin acted like a father to Sigurd, his hidden evil nature will gain the upper hand, when the gold is taken away from Fafnir. The wolf stands here for Regin and this association strengthens the negative depiction of this figure. The birds, depicted here as a symbol of wisdom, use here of another animal metaphor, showing the same cognitive abilities of the human mind.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Poems of the Elder Edda (The Middle Ages Series)*, trans. Patricia Terry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990)

The second part in which the birds actively interact with the protagonist contains also suggestions, but this time they address Sigurd's future and, in particular, his encounter with the "shield-maiden", Brunhild, who lies asleep surrounded by fire:

"Pack on your saddle the red rings, Sigurd-

few things worry a worthy king;

I can find you the fairest of maidens,

much wealth you'll have if you can win her.

"Green roads lead to Gjuki's domain-

good fortune follows a fearless man

there the great ruler rears a daughter;

he would give her for Sigurd's gold.

"There is a hall on Hinderfell

fenced around by a wall of flame;

wise men built it thee in the mountain

out of bright gold leaned from rivers.

"There is a shield-maid asleep on the mountain,

fierce flames rise in a wall around her.

Odin struck her with a sleep-thorn:

she had slain warriors he wanted to win.

"Sigurd! You can see the warrior maiden where

Vingskornir bore her out of the battle;

prince, you might summon Sigrdrifa from sleep,

but that depends on the Norns' decree"<sup>8</sup>.

The advices contained in these lines strengthen again the symbolic and metaphoric association of birds and wisdom: their knowledge is not limited to what happens in the present and close to them, but also extended to what happened in the past and not only among humans like Sigurd, but also among gods. The protagonist will follow their suggestions without hesitation and will be able to save his life.

The intervention of the birds is decisive for Sigurd, which highlights the active role of these animals in the narration.

Also Richard Wagner in his *Ring of the Nibelungs* will stress the strategic role of the birds, introducing them in different scenes of *Siegfried* and in *The Twilight of the Gods*. The only difference with the poetic *Edda* and the Saga, is that Wagner chooses to use just one bird, instead of six or seven. However, in Wagner the bird's dialogs with Siegfried play the same role that they had both in the Saga and in the poetic *Edda*, and warn Siegfried about Mine's plan to take possession of the ring and kill him. Unlike in the two previous texts, Siegfried doesn't plan to eat or roast the dragon's heart, but it put his sword in its breast, which cause the blood to flood out and reach his fingers. The blood is so hot that burns them. Siegfried puts them in his mount and he gradually notices that he could understand what a bird in the woods was saying to him:

---

<sup>8</sup> *Poems of the Elder Edda (The Middle Ages Series)*, trans. Patricia Terry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990)



It seems almost as if  
the birds were speaking to me!

Did the taste of its blood  
affect me?

That rare bird there,  
hark! what says its song?<sup>9</sup>

Siegfried talks directly to the bird he sees in front of him, which responds to  
him:

Hey! The Niblung's treasure  
now belongs to Siegfried!  
Now he'll find the hoard  
in the cave!

If he wants to take the Tarnhelm  
it will help him perform wonderous deeds;  
but if he could get the ring  
it would make him ruler of the world!<sup>10</sup>

The bird gives him precise instructions and information about the power of the ring,  
which will make him able to rule on everything. Siegfried doesn't ask any further  
questions, thanks the bird for his advice and promises it to do what it says:

Thanks, dear bird,

---

<sup>9</sup> Richard Wagner, *Siegfried*, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://www.rwagner.net/libretti/siegfried/e-sieg-a2s2.html>



for your counsel!

I'll gladly follow your call!<sup>11</sup>

These lines close the second scene of the second act but more space will be reserved to it in the next scene. The bird claims Siegfried's right to possess the treasure of the dragon and it warns him about Mime's treachery and lies:

Hey! The helmet and the ring

now belong to Siegfried!

O, he must not trust

the treacherous Mime!

Let Siegfried listen alertly

to the villain's lying words!

He can now understand

what Mime is thinking in his heart:

this is how the taste of blood affected him.<sup>12</sup>

Wagner attributes to the dragon's blood not only the power to understand the language of the birds, as told in the Saga and in the poetic *Edda*, but also the capacity to read other people's heart, and in this particular case, Mime's intentions. Siegfried kills him and after that, the voice of a bird starts to sing to him again:

Hail! Siegfried now has slain

the wicked dwarf!

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Now I know  
a wonderful wife for him:  
on a rocky height she is sleeping,  
with fire surrounding the spot:  
he who can break through the blaze  
and wake the bride,  
Brünnhilde would be his!<sup>13</sup>

After celebrating Siegfried for killing Mime, the bird informs him for the first time about Brünnhilde. In the bird's opinion she would be the perfect bride for him. For this reason, it indicates him the place in which she is sleeping and tells him how to wake her up. In this dialogic interaction between the protagonist and the bird of the forest, Siegfried expresses his gratitude calling its words sweet and lovely:

O lovely song!  
Sweetest lay!  
How its message burns  
my breast like fire!  
How fiercely it inflames  
and pulls at my heart!  
What shoots so swiftly  
through my heart and senses?

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Tell me, sweet friend!<sup>14</sup>

Siegfried calls the bird “sweet friend” and asks him for more information about the way he can win Brünnhilde:

Gaily in grief

I sing of love:

blissfully from woe

I weave my lay:

only lovers know its meaning!<sup>15</sup>

The bird awakes Siegfried’s interest in winning the sleeping woman and begs for more detailed information:

It drives me forth

from here, rejoicing,

out of the forest to the rocks.

Once more tell me,

lovely singer:

shall I break through the fire?

Can I waken the bride?<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The answer of the bird stresses the courage needed by the one who desires to win  
Brünnhilde: only a fearless man can pass the ring of fire that surrenders her and wake  
her up:

The bride can never be won  
nor Brünnhilde awakened  
by a coward;  
only by one who knows not fear!<sup>17</sup>

After hearing these words Siegfried asks finally the bird to indicate him the way to  
find her:

The stupid boy  
who knows not fear,  
my little bird, that is I!  
This very day I  
vainly strove  
to learn fear from Fafner:  
now I burn with longing  
to learn it from Brünnhilde!

How can I find the way to the mountain?<sup>18</sup>

At this point of the play, the bird flies really close to Siegfried and then indicates him  
the way he was to follow in order to find Brünnhilde. The bird here has an astonishing

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

active role, saving first his life and then indicating him the way to take to find the best bride for him, flying in one specific direction. In the second scene of the second act Siegfried is trying to find Brünnhilde but he can't see the bird anymore:

My bird has flown away!

With fluttering flight

and sweet song

it prettily pointed out my path:

now it has vanished far away!

I would do best to find

the mountain for myself.

I'll continue further

on the way my guide showed me.<sup>19</sup>

At this point in the story he meets the mysterious Wanderer. Siegfried reveals him to know about the woman sleeping surrounded by fire because of the bird in the forest.

The Wanderer seems to don't believe Siegfried's words:

A bird may chatter much,

but no one can understand it.

How could you

make sense of its song?<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

The young here tells him about the dragon he slayed and about Mime's malicious plan to kill him. After a while Siegfried start to get impatience and asks the Wanderer about his identity. When Siegfried complains again about the lost sign of the bird, the old man, which doesn't reveal his true identity, warns him and tried to persuade him to give up his plan to wake Brünnhilde up. The Wanderer also claim that the bird left because it saw the lord of the raves. Ravens are associated with death and in this part Odin is foretelling Siegfried the dangerous of his endeavor:

It flew from you to save itself!

The lord of the ravens

it learnt was here:

woe to it if they catch it!

You shall not take

the way it showed!<sup>21</sup>

In the second act of the *Twilight of The Gods*, the capacity of Siegfried to understand

birds comes up again:

I set out for wood-game,

but only waterfowl showed itself.

Had I been rightly forewarned

I would have caught

three wild water-birds

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



who sang to me there on the Rhine  
that this very day I should be slain.<sup>22</sup>

The role of the three birds is the same of the bird in the forest: they are foretelling his destiny and with that warning him about incoming the danger. Siegfried understands what they are saying to him, but someone, he doesn't seem to pay the proper attention to them. Hagen, one of Gunther's vassals and the man who will kill Siegfried the same day, asks about his ability to understand the language of the birds, in order to understand if he is maybe aware of his plans because of the birds' songs:

I heard say, Siegfried,  
that you could understand

birdsong:  
is this so?<sup>23</sup>

Siegfried claims that it is a while that he doesn't hear the birds singing anymore. Hagen is planning at this point to kill Siegfried and to get revenge for Brünnhilde, that is why, when Siegfried asks if is the women who is giving Gunther a lot of worries, Hagen talks to himself almost making fun of the ingenuity of the hero: "If only he understood her as well as you do birdsong!". Siegfried's reply will indirectly prophesize his death. Since, as claimed by Siegfried, as soon as he started to listen to women, he doesn't pay attention to birds anymore, he will end up killed by Hagen

---

<sup>22</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Twilight of the Gods*, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://www.rwagner.net/libretti/gotterd/e-t-gott.html>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

because of a women. The ability of understand the bird appears again in the following dialogs between Siegfried and Gunther:

But now take good note

of my tale:

I must tell you of marvels.

My fingers were burning

from the dragon's blood:

I put them into my mouth to cool them:

scarcely had the moisture

touched my tongue

than I could straightway understand

what the birds were singing.

One sat on a bough and sang,

"Hey! Siegfried now owns

the Nibelung treasure!

Now he'll find the hoard

in the cave!

If he would take the Tarnhelm

it would serve him for mighty deeds;

but if he could get the ring

it would make him ruler of the world!"<sup>24</sup>

Hagen and the vassals that are surrounding and listening to Siegfried's story seem really intrigued by his ability to understand the birds and ask him if he has heard the birds again, after hearing the words about the ring:

I gathered up  
the ring and Tarnhelm:  
I listened again  
to the delightful songster  
who sat in the tree-top and sang,  
"Hey! Siegfried now owns  
the helmet and the ring.  
He must not trust  
the treacherous Mime!  
Only for him is he to gain the treasure;  
he lurks and lies in wait;  
he has designs on Siegfried's life.  
Oh, Siegfried must not trust Mime!"<sup>25</sup>

Hagen asks him at this point if the advice of the bird was a good one and gives him a horn to drink. The vassals again ask him about the bird, and Siegfried lively replays:

Sorrowfully I gazed up

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

into the tree-tops:  
it still sat there and sang:  
"Hey! Siegfried now has slain  
the wicked dwarf!  
Now I know  
a wonderful wife for him:  
on a rocky height she is sleeping,  
with fire surrounding the spot:  
he who can break through the blaze  
and wake the bride,  
Brünnhilde would be his."<sup>26</sup>

These words capture even more Gunther's attention, who is listening with increasing interest. In this moment, two ravens shortly circle Siegfried and then fly away. Hagen asks him sarcastically if he can understand now what those birds were saying and then, after calling for revenge, kills him. The birds again, this time identified with two ravens, are trying to save his life but it is too late. Like the bird indicating him the way to reach Brünnhilde, these two are possibly trying to indicate him a way to escape. Ravens, as mentioned before, are commonly associated to the death, since they eat corpses, and here their appearance may also be a sign for Siegfried's negative fate.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Wagner assigned to the birds a more active role than the one in both Old Norse texts, although their role of saving the hero's life is a constant in the different versions of the story.

Another text when birds have the ability to speak to the protagonist and play a crucial role in the story is the version of Cinderella of the Grimm Brothers. It is one of the most famous fairytales, the number 21 in their well-known collection of children's stories.

In the story the birds appear in three different parts, helping both Cinderella and the king. They also seek revenge for the injustice committed by the two stepsisters.

A white bird comes to visit the young Cinderella at her mother's grave, where her tears made a tree grow. The bird grants her all the wishes she has:

"A white bird came to the tree every time, and whenever she expressed a wish, the bird would throw down to her what she had wished for".<sup>27</sup>

The birds that will help her later in the story are pigeons, as Cinderella says in her prayers, when she asks them for help:

"You tame pigeons, you turtledoves, and all you birds beneath the sky, come

and help me to gather: The good ones go into the pot,

The bad ones go into your crop."<sup>28</sup>

Cinderella asks the birds to help her with one of the two impossible tasks that

---

<sup>27</sup> Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Cinderella*, accessed May 3, 2015, <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm021.html>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

her mother give her, when she expresses her wish to go the festival organized by the king, so he could find a bride for himself. For the second task, Cinderella will ask her winged animals to help her again repeating the same words she used the first time. Even after completing these two tasks, her stepmother refuses her wish to join the festival with the excuse the Cinderella doesn't have any dress to wear for this important event. The birds will again help her dropping all the three nights a magnificent dress, every time more beautiful than the night before.

The next scene with the birds protagonists is the one when the king is trying to find the woman who can fit the shoes left by Cinderella the last night of the festival. The two stepsisters, following the advice of their mother, cut their toe, in order to be able to wear the precious shoe, which is too tight for their feet. However, when the king passes close to the grave of Cinderella's mother, he will hear the birds singing:

Rook di goo, rook di goo!

There's blood in the shoe.

The shoe is too tight,

This bride is not right!<sup>29</sup>

As soon as the king hears these words he rides back and tries with the other stepsister. However, the birds repeat the same words again. The king comes back for the third time and finally finds the woman, whose foot is able to fit the little shoe. This time the birds comment positively and sing:

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Rook di goo, rook di goo!

No blood's in the shoe.

The shoe's not too tight,

This bride is right!<sup>30</sup>

The lines are opened every time with an onomatopoeic verse, followed by verse in rhymes. The king can understand their singing like Sigurd/Siegfried, but this time without any magical ritual or powerful blood. However, the attitude towards the birds is the same. The king doesn't question their word, he trusts them and goes back twice in order to find the right owner of the shoe. This blind confidence in birds resembles closely the depiction of these animals in the Saga of the Volsungs, in the *Edda* and in Wagner's operas. They are used as a symbol for wisdom and justice. In the last part of the story the birds take a cruel revenge on the stepsisters, flying down to them and pecking their eyes, which made them blind for their entire life:

“Afterwards, as they came out of the church, the older one was on the left side, and the younger one on the right side, and then the pigeons pecked out the other eye from each of them. And thus, for their wickedness and falsehood, they were punished with blindness as long as they lived.”<sup>31</sup>

The active participation of the birds in this story is maximized by their direct intervention in the last part, when they punish the two stepsisters for their actions. The

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

revenge for Cinderella makes them appear as figure with a high sense of justice, which lines up with the moral values transmitted in the text: honesty and kindness deserve to be praised while falsehood and cruelty have to be treated with no mercy. The corporal punishment is a metaphoric one, which also implies the dangerous of such wicked and evil conduct.

The analysis in this work has shown that, although the trend in literature depicts birds as a passive object and source for associations and identification, other literary texts reserve them a way more active role in the narration. This process implies their humanization, which means, they depiction with features that belong to the human being. The metaphoric and symbolic associations of these animals with wisdom and knowledge, triggered by the long historical observation of this animals from sides of scientists and writers, can be considered as evidence for the cognitive activities that create such figure in the language and that lead to their exploitation in literature.



## Bibliography

- Baudelaire, Charles, *The Poems and Prose Poems of Charles Baudelaire with an Introductory Preface by James Huneker*. ed. James Huneker, 2011, Kindle Edition.
- Byock, Jess, *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. London: University Press, 1990.
- Hopper, Paul. *Emergent Grammar in The New Psychology of Language*. ed. Michael Tomasello. New York: Psychology Press, 2002.
- Feder Kittay, Eva. *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure*. Oxford: Oxford University of California Press, 1990.
- Larsen-Freeman, Diane and Cameron, Lynne. *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics*. Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Lopez, Barry, *Wolves and Men*. New York: Schribner, 1978
- Lutwack, Leonard, *Birds in Literature*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994.
- Turner, *Reading Minds. The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science*. (Princeton: Princeton Mark University Press, 1991.

## Web Resources

- Wagner Richard: <http://www.rwagner.net/opere/e-t-ring.html>
- Grimm Jakob, Grimm Wilhel: <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm021.html>