

The Comparison of the Metaphorical Meaning of “Bird” in William Butler Yeats’ Poems and *The Book of Songs*

Zhang Li, Shen Linlin

*(North China Electric Power University, and Baoding, Hebei, China
Email:lzhang25@126.com)

** (North China Electric Power University, and Baoding, Hebei, China
Email:907991240@qq.com)

Abstract:

“Bird” is one of the most common metaphors whether in Chinese or foreign poetry, which is used to expound the abstract concepts of love, freedom, immortality and so on. There are 90 poems contain “bird” in *The Book of Songs*, and many of Yeats’ works include “bird”. Therefore, the pages following would take Yeats poetry and *The Book of Songs* as the research object, combined with the detailed textual reading, to explore the similarities and differences of the metaphorical meanings of “bird” in Chinese and foreign poetry. The results show that although their metaphorical meanings are all related to freedom and love, they are still diverse in some aspects.

Keywords —bird; metaphorical meaning; Yeats; *The Book of Songs*

I. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor, understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another, is not just a matter of language. George Lakoff and Mark Johnsen (2003) have found that metaphor is gradually assimilated into our everyday life. Accordingly, human thought processes are largely metaphorical, that is the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. In this regard, metaphor that profits from its conciseness and comprehensiveness may be suitable for our conceptual system. At the same time, animal is one of the most common metaphors on account of its intimate nature with nature and human beings.

For example, “bird” that flies freely in the sky, not relying on anything tangible is regarded as the symbol of nature and freedom. Meanwhile, it can also be a representative image related with sexual desire, such as the fish-bird pattern on the painted pottery at Banpo relics and Yeats’ *Leda and the Swan*. In fact, the metaphorical meanings of “bird”

are diverse along with various contexts and distinctive cultural background, which comes to be traced in William Butler Yeats’ Poems (*He Wishes His Beloved were Died, Sailing to Byzantium, White Birds, Leda and Swan and The Wild Swans at Coole*) and *The Book of Songs* which is the earliest poetry anthology that shows the image of “bird” in ancient China. According to the statistics, there are more than 90 poems that mention the image of bird.

Thus, based on Yeats’ works, mainly the 5 poems mentioned above, and *The Book of Songs*, the pages that follow will explore the similarities and differences of the metaphorical meaning of “bird”.

II. BIRD---THE ONTOLOGICAL METAPHOR OF FREEDOM

Johnsen(2003) states that understanding our experiences in terms of objects and substances allows us to pick out parts of our experience and treat them as discrete entities or substances of a uniform kind. Once we can identify our experiences

as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them—and, by this means, reason about them. In this case, bird flying is a symbol of freedom.

However, in Yeats' *He Wishes His Beloved were Died* the bird represents the pure free will. In *The Wild Swans at Coole* the bird represents not only the free will but also the nature power. Yet, in *The Book of Songs*, there is a hint of reluctance of separation apart from the free will.

A. Bird---the Free Will and Nature Power in Yeats' Poems

Bird is often the ontological metaphor of freedom or free will with a view to its living habits---getting rid of the restriction of land by flying freely in the sky. For example, in *He Wishes His Beloved were Died*, the narrator relates his lovers as the bird that has a strong free will so that his affection is doomed.

Nor would you rise and hasten away,
Though you have the will of wild birds,
But know your hair was bound and wound
About the stars and moon and sun:

Here, what bothers the man is his lover's "will of wild birds", that is a strong sense of freedom in reality. So that he yearns for her death. Only under this circumstance, she, as a spirit, might be able to forgive him, willing to submit to his will and be the person he admires day and night rather than "hasten away" from his touch.

As one kind of bird, Swan's beauty and grace are well known. Apart from these, its power is showed to the fullest in Yeats's *The Wild Swans at Coole*. The beating of its wings evokes a sense of awe and wonder from the speaker. More importantly, their movement drives by instinct and will. On account of on his first visit, the speaker wants to count how many swans are on the lake but they suddenly fly away before he could finish. So for the speaker, the metaphorical meaning of swan here is a kind of freedom from human anxieties and logic. Besides, the swans are representative of the majesty and unpredictable power of nature, which is eternal. Compared with the speaker who has changed a lot, the swans remain filled with passion and vitality since his first visit.

B. Bird--- the Anxiety of Separation in The Book of Songs

In fact, bird, as the embodiment of freedom and nature power could come to be traced in Chuang Tzu's *A Happy Excursion*. When Peng flies, it wings obscure the sky like the clouds, which is the embodiment of Chuang Tzu's pursuit for human freedom and transcendence. However, there are some differences in *The Book of Songs*.

In traditional Chinese culture, bird's flying or migration at the turn of seasons signifies a long journey, which triggers a hint of sadness. This has been completely demonstrated in the Swallows and Wild Geese of *The Book of Songs*.

Swallows

A pair of swallows flies in the sky with their wings, sometimes low and sometimes high.

My younger sister is today married out to a distant place.

I send her to the outside of our town and depart.

Till she disappears, my tears fall down like rainfalls.

This poem is the earliest farewell poem in Chinese history and describes the brother's attachment to his sister who is going to marry. The author introduces his sister's leaving by a pair of swallows. Although his sister is about live together with a gentleman like these two swallows, he is unwilling to depart.

Wild Geese

Wild geese fly away with double wings rustling.

The officer sent by the king is out of his door and labors in the outskirts of town.

All toilers are aided, and miserable widowers and widows are in sympathy with.

On the poet's hard journey, he saw a flock of geese fly by, which reminds him the plight of the refugees, especially the widows. Just like the wild geese that finds no place to set, the vagrants wander far away from home.

III. BIRD---THE ONTOLOGICAL METAPHOR OF LOVE

The bird, such as mandarin duck, magpie, swan goose and phoenix in China, and black-necked swan in the West, used to expound the metaphorical meaning of love is not unusual on account of its

loyalty towards its partner. Yet there are some differences displayed in Yeats' poems and *The Book of Songs*.

C. *Sea Mew and Swan in Yeats' Poems*

In Yeats' poems, two distinctive features are (1) sea mew (or the white birds flying above the sea) is a distinctive metaphor for pure love far away from the worldly obsession. ("I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!"); (2) the swan shows a kind of love combined with superpower or might.

The usage of "white birds" has its own background with Maud Gonne who once said that she would like to become a sea gull and fly freely over the sea. Thus, for Yeats, this white bird expresses the poet's love on shaky ground and the sadness difficult to disguise in heart.

The swan has the metaphorical meaning of desirable love, because it strictly abides by monogamy. If its lover dies, the swan will not eat and sleep, even die for love. However, in Yeats' poems, the metaphorical meaning of the swan is different in *Leda and the Swan* and *Wild Swans at Coole*.

In the *Wild Swans at Coole*, the swan has a traditional metaphorical meaning of "unwearied" "lover[s]" and their "hearts have not grown old." However, the swan in *Leda and the Swan* not only has "great wings", "dark webs", "bill", "feathered glory", "white rush", "loins", "brute blood" and "indifferent beak", but also is the incarnation of Zeus. The words all used to describe it are powerful. So its metaphorical meaning may be the might that not only has the force to impact human lives but also may change the path of history.

D. *The Birdsong---Treated as the Metaphor of Love*

In *The Book of Songs*, the metaphorical meaning of love doesn't rely on bird, but birdsong, which has been seen in the following cases:

1) *In Ospreys*

A pair of ospreys sing of their love on an islet in the river.

A girl is so slender and beautiful that a youth loves her and wishes to make her his wife.

Ospreys usually appear in pair and their love song reminds gentleman the yearning for love and the pursuit to a fair maiden

2) *In Leaves of the Gourd*

When the Jishui Water is at the flood, the cries of the pheasant come to me from the bank.

The water does not reach an axle of my cart, and female pheasant is calling her another half.

The pheasant is in courtship and its cries trigger the lady's anxiety of waiting for the return of her lover.

IV. BIRD---THE ONTOLOGICAL METAPHOR OF MORTALITY AND IMMORTALITY

In Western culture, the metaphorical meaning of bird as death can be traced back to ancient Egypt. At that time, people had a unique understanding of death, such as mummy and rebirth after 3000 years. They divided people into Ka and Ba two parts: Ka means "double", or human body; Ba is a man-headed monster whose body is snake-like, representing an immortal soul. When a person is about to die, Ba will fall on him and bring his soul into the sky. So in Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*, the bird has a metaphorical meaning about life and death, which is not obvious in *The Book of Songs*. For example, the narrator in *Sailing to Byzantium* says:

(1) That is no country for old men. The young

In one another's arms, birds in the trees,

Those dying generations—at their song,

(2) Or set upon a golden bough to sing

To lords and ladies of Byzantium

Bird appears twice in the poem: in the thoughtless world of the young, and in the transcendent world of Byzantium. Here, the metaphorical meaning of "bird" concerns with mortality and immortality.

In the first case, the birds are called "those dying generations", that is these birds sing beautifully, yet are unaware of their own mortality. In the second case, however, the speaker images himself as a golden bird. Birdsong thus becomes something

different here—instead of something beautiful yet fleeting, it becomes everlasting. And it could witness the change of history.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The metaphorical meaning of bird that is one of the most common animal images in poetry. By analyzing the metaphorical meaning of “bird” in Yeats’ poems and *The Book of Songs*, we discover the similarities and differences. As the ontological metaphor of freedom, bird in Yeats’ poems represents not only the free will but also the nature power. While, in *The Book of Songs*, bird shows the narrator’s sadness face his lover and family member’s leaving. As the ontological metaphor of love, sea mew and the swan are two distinctive metaphors. In *The Book of Songs*, the birdsong is regarded as the metaphor of love rather than the bird itself. However, in Yeats’ *Sailing to Byzantium*,

the bird has a unique meaning about life and death, which is not obvious in Chinese culture.

Above all, what the “bird” provide is diverse metaphorical meanings and various metaphorical models for what the mind is and thereby allow us to focus on different aspects of mental experience.

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