

Avian Figures of Speech in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer*

Abstract

The paper is couched in the larger pessimism of the environmental debate which harangues humans on being the terminator par excellence. The only species which has systematically destroyed all other species and as Terry Galvin has argued humans are the only species which have almost single handedly destroyed all other species in the space of a few hundred years and now face the grim prospect of bequeathing to the future an earth devoid of most plant and animal species and an earth where monoculture and sameness is the norm. Where along with species loss, language and culture loss is also taking place leaving the world consuming the same genetically modified food and speaking the same language of development, where animals are either eliminated completely or reared in factory farms as food. The paper focuses on the language of James Fenimore Cooper, particularly the metaphor, similes, and epithets. The larger argument being that species loss also leads to language becoming less colourful and metaphorical as there are fewer natural plants and animals around, hence nature related figures of speech also decline.

Keywords: Bird, Non-Human, Metaphor, Simile, Epithet.

Introduction

Further on bird similes we get interesting results. Similes of natural elements and birds are equally common in *the Deerslayer*. Hawkeye is regularly praised for his keen sight and highly accurate vision and the Iroquois call themselves blind and him an owl whose eyes can penetrate through the night (*The Deerslayer*, p. 781). On getting some valuable information, Judith is very eager at getting this knowledge; Cooper compares her eagerness to the sudden swoop a hawk makes when it sights a chicken (*The Deerslayer*, p. 891). When Natty is captured by the Hurons and there is imminent threat to his life, Chingachgook calls HistHoneysuckle of the Hills and fears they will travel back alone without Natty (*The Deerslayer*, p. 910). When there is a combat between Natty and the young Huron, Natty saves himself by hiding behind a tree acknowledging his inexperience but claiming that he will not be shot down like an owl blinded by daylight on an open beech (*The Deerslayer*, p. 595). Bird epithets are many; when the brave Huron warrior is mortally injured by Natty, he is compared to a motionless but fallen bird which regards the hunter or fowler conscious of every movement (*The Deerslayer*, p. 599). Describing the noiseless movements of a canoe and how it was the most reliable method of transport during stealth warfare with the Hurons, Cooper compares the smooth gliding movements of a bark canoe to a noiseless aquatic bird (*The Deerslayer*, p. 758). Defending her love and loyalty to Chingachgook, Hist notes that even the robin and the martin come year after year to their old nest; so it becomes a woman to take lessons from birds and be true to their lovers (*The Deerslayer*, p. 877). Explaining his earlier aversion to serpents and his subsequent change of heart Natty tells of the time when he was averse to serpents because he had heard from the Moravian missionaries of the biblical story of the fall of man and their expulsion from Eden because a serpent had tempted Eve, but after he met Chingachgook and heard of the honoured title of Great Serpent which his name meant, the sound of serpent is as pleasant as the call of the whip-poor-will to his ears (*The Deerslayer*, p. 904).

Aim of the Study

The study reveals a connection between nature and the language, it proposes that a closeness to nature is revealed in the language of men if they note all instances of the kinship between the human and non-human natural world. Perceptive authors like Cooper are able to note the similarities between the human and non-human and it is expressed in their language suggesting kinship that reveal the

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interdependence between the two. All metaphors show the connection between the animal in human nature and reveals the animal in humans. The connections between human and animal are evident for all to see.

All these are refer to birds. Similes on fish are relatively fewer and have been clubbed with birds. Similarities between fish and humans are prolific in nature, just as humans need air to breathe and will die without it so too fish need water to survive and will die without it, so too each must be comfortable in his or her own skin. Fish prey upon each other just as men and animals do on land, for although their element is water they are not much different from land creatures and although we find them trying to and not try to fly in air or walk on land. So it is with humans (The Deerslayer, p. 640). Rivenoak trying to make Natty accept the marriage proposal of Sumach whose husband has been killed by Natty tells him that only Sumach supported him even though her song was like a heartbroken wren whose mate has been preyed by a hawk (The Deerslayer, p. 951). When the Delaware hears his sweetheart's(Wah-ta!-Wah) voice and bright laugh, Cooper writes Chingachgook is able to distinguish it from the Iroquois women and reminds him of the tweet and chirp of a wren (The Deerslayer, p. 635).Hurry missing his companion in crime wants to leave the Glimmerglass as soon as possible now that Hutter is dead and compares the numerous populations of the Hurons to innumerable pigeons on the shore (The Deerslayer, p. 852). Chingachgook defending simplicity of his beloved's attire claims that

since Wah-ta!-wah is a red Indian girl, Deerslayer just as the young of animals and birds are known by feathers which are different from the full grown so too she is like the fledgling of a pigeon, and distinguishable from the full grown specimen and hence he comes to the conclusion that we should be clad in such a way that friends recognise us (The Deerslayer, pp. 634-5).Hetty escaping some imagined danger is like a startled bird frightened at the approach of unexpected danger (The Deerslayer, p. 642). Overwhelmed at Judith's beauty Rivenoak reasons that sometimes Manitou clothes small creatures like the humming bird beautifully and large creatures like the moose with not much beauty. The Hurons are willing to make peace with the palefaces. But they have one condition that Natty should marry Sumach, the woman he has widowed by killing of her husband, the lynx. Because her children are still young and need to be fed by a man, but in the skirmish that follows Natty inadvertently kills Sumach's brother, the Panther too. He refuses to marry Sumach as she is too old for him and because he will not mix his blood with that of Red woman. Hist scolds Briarthorn like a born virago. Indian women were known to be terrible scolds, Hist in a shrewish manner calls Briarthorn a woodchuck of the Delawares; and in the days when there were no mirrors asks him to look at himself in the spring or river and he will see that even if he disguises himself as a colourful humming bird he will stillbe black as a crow(The Deerslayer, p. 1001).

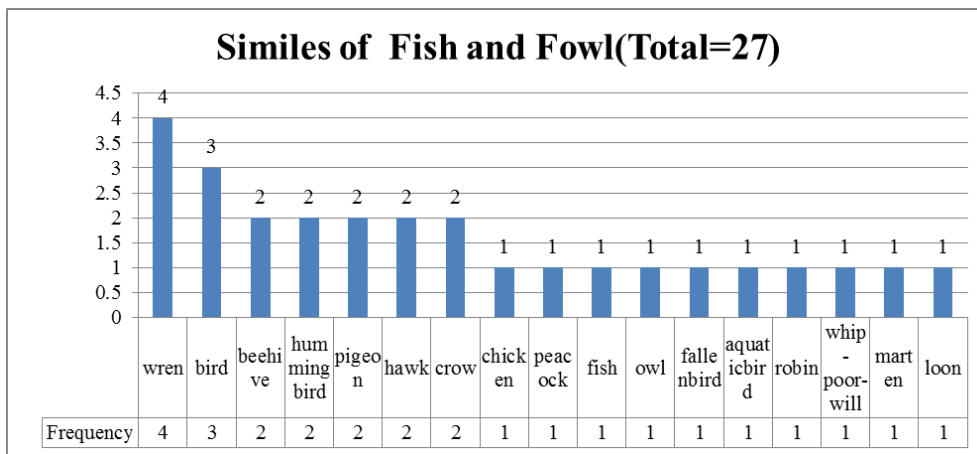


Figure 1

Revealing the indifference to not only Indians lives but also to animals lives which were ruthlessly butchered, Hurry believes that scalping an Indian and displaying his skull is as profitable as killing a wolf and showing the crown (government) its ears and demanding bounty for crows heads as the crown equally pays for all these (The Deerslayer, p. 529). In the woods many bird sounds are heard, "There was no mistaking the note of the bird, (loon) which is so familiar to all who know the sounds of the American lakes. "Shrill, tremulous, loud and sufficiently prolonged, it seemed a cry of warning" (The Deerslayer, p. 585). In warfare often the Indians are like predatory cat on a bird(The Deerslayer, p. 743).

Metaphors on birds are intertwined with epithets. All examples are not given here but a

substantial number are enumerated. The ark is referred to as the duck, "The appearance of the opening duck seemed to first to arouse the Hurons from their apathy" (The Deerslayer, p. 824). Many accurate instances of over-hunting are also given, a bird is called a dark spot, which turn out to be a duck which comes out to breathe and shake its wing and it is shot during this action by a bullet which goes through its breast (The Deerslayer, p. 825). Cooper comments on the bio-diversity of the region and man's harmful role in Nature. This reminds one of the ongoing tussles between the green activists trying to save the habitat of over 100 species of birds at the Noida bird sanctuary from the forces of development and real estate. Cooper comments in that distant time the pristine wilderness was harmonious and the lakes

in the interior of New York were frequented by migratory aquatic birds like the goose, the gull, the loon, and the duck (The Deerslayer, p. 925).

Struck at Judith's glamorous appearance, Rivenoak likens her to an exotic bird, unseen in their parts and asks her name and origin for if they went home without this information the villagers would make fun of them, they ask her if she a wren, or a cat bird (The Deerslayer, p. 995). Chingachgook seeking advice of Hist remarks that the smallest bird (wren) may sing the sweetest (wisest) and hence her advice at this critical juncture was crucial present alongside is the idea that her tone too is agreeable or 'sweetest' (The Deerslayer, p. 911). And again to express affection for a friend it is claimed that the voice of a friend and the song of the wren are never tiresome (The Deerslayer, p. 936). Inquiring about Judith's sibling Natty inquires curiously if there is another bird

in the same nest. (The Deerslayer, p. 506). The metaphorical languages to birds never end; Chingachgook asks Hetty (Drooping Lily) if his sweetheart inquired about him. "Was his name sung by a little bird among the Iroquois? ... Will my sister say words of song? What she sing most-how she look-often she laughs.... she sang Chingachgook oftener than anything else" (The Deerslayer, p. 712). Judith asks Natty, "Where is your sweetheart, Deerslayer?" He answers that his sweetheart is in the forest, implying that he is, in love with the soft rain and in love with the clouds that float in the blue heaven, in love with overflowing branches of trees -and in love with the birds of the wood (The Deerslayer, pp. 616-7). When Natty is captured Chingachgook implies that Natty, the paleface has the sight and courage of an eagle recalling to mind the bald eagle which is the national bird of America (The Deerslayer, p. 911).

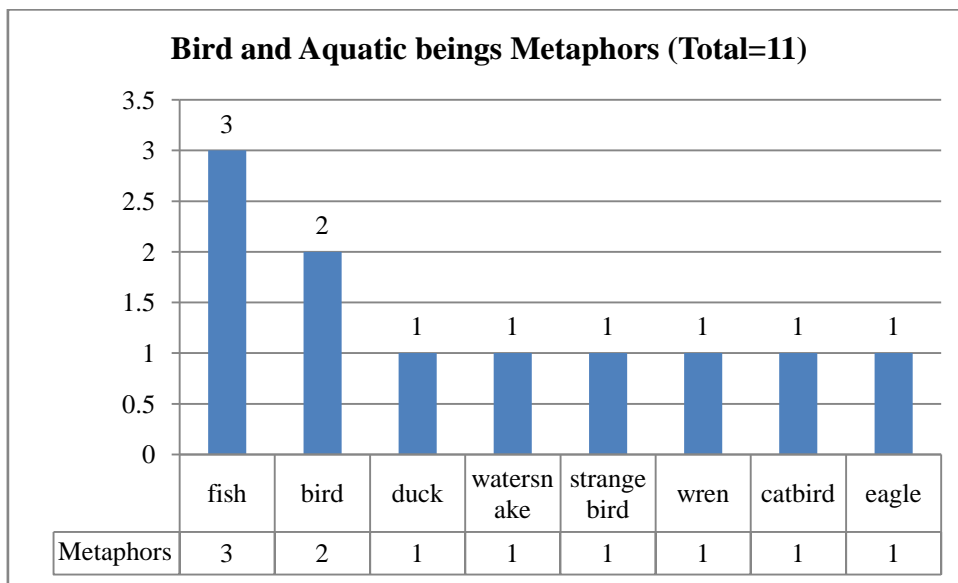


Figure 2

Epithets related to birds are numerous, some nicknames are a similarity with some animal or bird which humans should feel proud to emulate Deerslayer boasting about his honesty tells us about the history of his names, firstly he was called straight tongued because he wasn't given to lying and then later on he was fast runner so he was named a Pigeon and then Lap ear because of his sharp hearing like that of a dog and the later on he became known as Deerslayer (The Deerslayer, p. 546).

Indians comparing each other's martial prowess, one is Hawkeye . . . known for his keen sight and one is the panther known for his long leaps (The Deerslayer, p. 780). Explaining how he got the sobriquet Hawkeye, Deerslayer recounts the life and death encounter between the lynx and him and how he was renamed Hawkeye charitably by the fallen warrior who indifferent to his impending death but

graciously grants the epithet of Hawkeye on Natty. Before starting a journey to the Happy Grounds because he lost a life and death battle between Natty and himself, he confers the title of Hawkeye on Natty, his slayer (The Deerslayer, p. 721). Thus nicknames and other epithets related to the avian family are common in the novel. Expostulating on the charm of the morning, Cooper says, that the morning was filled with birds carolling and like hymns sung in praise of the creator the feathered tribe was singing (The Deerslayer, p. 591). Listening to Hetty expostulating on the Bible the Indians compare the teachings of the bible to a sweet bird singing beautifully (The Deerslayer, pp. 707-8). Wondering on the almighty power of Nature and its connection with God Deerslayer believes that winds blowing and tempests howling are in the hands of God, and four legged creatures also follow nature (The Deerslayer, p. 611).

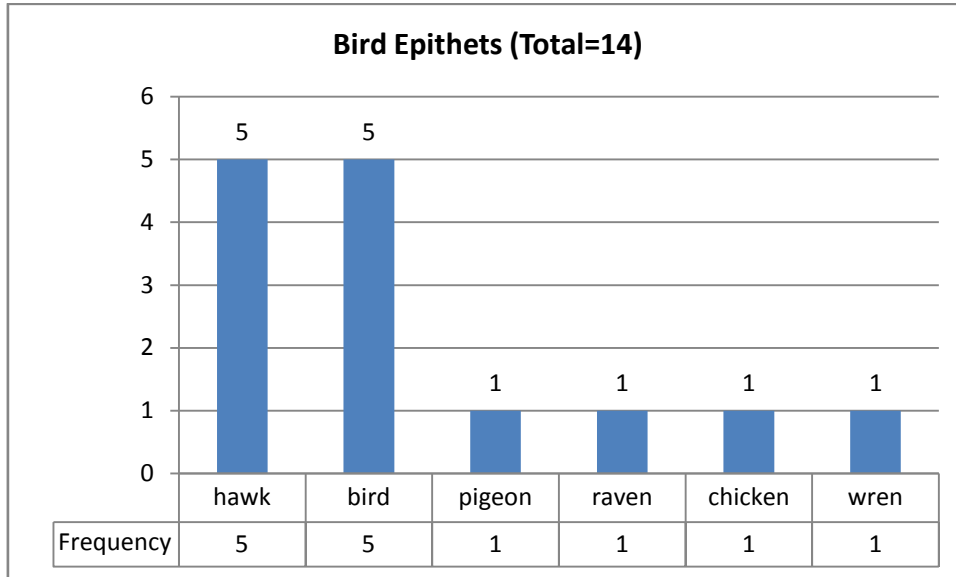


Figure 3

The Deerslayer is full of images and figures of speech related to the woods, forests, wilderness and the plant life therein. Similes related to trees abound in the novel. Cooper says leaves of the trees were numerous and they covered the boughs like clouds which cover a sky during a storm (*The Deerslayer*, p. 635). When Tom Hutter is captured by the Hurons, Hurry says that old Tom looked like a captured bear as he stretched and pulled at the hemlock branches (*The Deerslayer*, p. 738). Discussing the teachings in the Bible the verses are compared to seeds which may grow into large trees when one has all but forgotten about them (*The Deerslayer*, p. 707). Describing the world where clocks were few, time was read from the stars Cooper says, one experienced in reading time from the movement of the sun would have noticed the sun at its peak, when the *Deerslayer* landed on this point, when the Hurons were now camping near the castle. This spot had fewer trees and it had a strategic position. And it had a lawn like appearance because of its position it was popular amongst the hunters and Indians alike, its lawn like appearance was also due to the Indian habit of setting fire to places to keep vegetation in check. Lawns such as these were very rare in virgin forests (*The Deerslayer*, p. 946). Because these forests were untouched by the Indians and whites, they are pristine, without lawns. In other places, Indians managed over growth in forest by using fires for pruning and controlling over-growth. Freely admitting that he is not learned man, *Deerslayer* admits that he is not ashamed to admit that he is unlearned and he has only studied through the forests, mountains, hills, rivers, brooks, and valleys and saplings. And he believes that these may provide better education than books. (*The Deerslayer*, p. 727). Hist seeing her lover is impressed by his physical strength and Cooper calls him an Apollo in the wilderness (*The Deerslayer*, p. 715). Contrasting the woods and the towns, Natty opts for woods, saying that settlements or cities are full of contradictions and there is no such disharmony in the woods. He says that there are too many forts and churches in the towns where one stand for war and

the other for peace, so how come cities are full of two contradictory things? Instead he opts for life in the woods or wilderness where the arbours are churches raised by Nature (*The Deerslayer*, p. 745). Judith's beauty is described in a hyperbolic manner thus, Judith's famed beauty had spread through travellers, borderers, highway men just as riven trees, rocks and eagle's old nest are known to naturalists in a given locale (*The Deerslayer*, p. 776).

Conclusion

So we see the predominance of bird and avian figures of speech invoking a reality where there were far more birds than there are today reminding us of the extinction and near extinction of many bird species due to habitat loss and over-hunting. Hence in times foregone the connection between the wild and human was closer and the identification with the wild more in primitive societies than in the technology driven society of today.

Suggestions

Preserving non-human species is not only our bounden duty but will also lead to our spiritual salvation as is taught in some religious texts. Animism or pantheism or Nature worship should not be mocked but respected as a stairway to enlightenment. In addition the enrichment of language is a natural corollary to spiritual enlightenment as our language like that of the Hurons will be full of natural imagery be it avian, mammalian, floral or any other if we preserve what the natural in our surroundings.

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