The Conference of the Birds Study Guide

The Conference of the Birds by Sufi texts#Farid ad-Din Attar

BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 29-75

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 29-75 Summary

The hoopoe, wise Solomon's friend, announces to a dozen birds that, needing a king, they must shake off Self and fly to Simorgh. The Way is long and requires heart. If as pilgrims they renounce Self, Simorgh who is nearby yet veiled, transcendent, all-powerful, magnificent, and mysterious, will sacrifice his inner soul for them. First appearing in China, Simorgh lets one feather float down, and from it throughout the world people imagine his shape.

When the hoopoe finishes his speech, the birds are enthusiastic but soon hesitate and make excuses. Nightingale pleads that he cannot be parted from his one love, the rose, to which the hoopoe responds that this is superficial and delusional, as the thorny rose needs no defender, her beauty fades, and she laughs at the nightingale, not for him. The hoopoe tells about a dervish who weeps for seven years over a beautiful princess and rejects her warning that her servants plan to kill him. The dervish cannot leave, because she once has smiled at him. She replies that it is a smile of pity. The parrot, who recalls being caged, longs only to drink from Khezr's stream. The hoopoe denounces the parrot as a "cringing slave" and points out that Khezr fails to befriend someone whose mind is set entirely on God.

The peacock focuses on returning to paradise whence he is banished for heeding the snake. The hoopoe warns that he is straying from the Way, for paradise is but a drop in the sea of Truth. Adam forfeits grace to see beyond it to his Lord, so drawing near begins by renouncing the heart. The duck claims to be the purest bird because she lives in water and has no reason to go elsewhere, but the hoopoe warns that the water drop of creation is and instantly is not. The pompous, headstrong partridge wants only precious jewels, an excuse that the hoopoe calls lame, and tells about King Solomon's signet ring, which slows his entry to paradise by 500 years. When the homa, whose shadow heralds kingship, looks down on Simorgh, the hoopoe reminds him that kings face Judgment Day, and tells of King Mahmoud who, after death, realizes that only God has majesty, blushes at his "imperial pretense," wishes that he had been anything but a king, and curses homa's coming.

The hawk brags of perching on the king's arm and looks down on Simorgh, an attitude that the hoopoe calls superficial, for only Simorgh truly rules without rivals. Earthly kings commit crimes and harm those nearest them. The hoopoe illustrates with the story of a monarch who loves a beautiful young slave, but makes him quake with fear by shooting apples off his head. The heron whimpers about his misery and jealous love for the ocean. The hoopoe tells the heron that he does not understand the sea, full of sharks, its water salty, treacherously sucking down ships and drowning crews. Since the sea cannot rest, it cannot offer the peace that only the Lord grants and to which He invites the birds. The hoopoe tells of a hermit, who asks the sea why it dresses in mourning

and boils without fire. The ocean longs for an absent Friend and refreshment by the cleansing stream of paradise.

The owl hoots about the tranquil mind he finds only living in abandoned ruins, where he hopes one day to find a treasure. Simorgh is a "childish story." The hoopoe calls the owl a "besotted fool," letting life slip away. The love of treasure is blasphemous and idolatrous, meriting hell. The hoopoe tells of a miser dies, leaving a cache of gold and appears to his son in a dream as a mouse, darting about to guard against thieves. The timid finch claims to be too weak and timid to make the trip and too unworthy to face Simorgh. The hoopoe condemns the finch's hypocrisy of likening himself to Joseph in the well and tells a story about Jacob's dream about his lost son. The angel Gabriel warns Joseph to renounce his tears or be dropped from God's list of prophets. Jacob no longer speaks his beloved son's name, but Gabriel accuses him of sighing it in his heart —which also breaks the vow.

The remaining birds' excuses are too many and too lame to tell, and the hoopoe declares that the quest for Truth is "no journey for the indolent." When the birds object that they are too weak and cannot fathom the hoopoe's mysteries, he insists that daring is needed. Because long ago Simorgh creates birds of every kind by casting shadows on the earth, each is linked with him. While God and God's Friend are not the same, as God's shadow they cannot be moved by life or death, and unless Simorgh's form appears mirrored in their hearts, they cannot bear his beauty or His grace. The hoopoe illustrates with three stories: 1) a king so handsome that people cannot bear to be in his presence or out of it; he lines his walls with mirrors to pacify the throngs. Pilgrims must see mirrored in their hearts the shadow of the "Friend's nobility" and pass through to Reality, like the sun coming through clouds. 2) Alexander the Great dresses as a messenger but people are slow to obey; they would laugh were he to reveal his true identity. 3) Afflicted by the Evil Eye, Ayaz falls sick and the king who loves him sends commiseration through a servant, but then arrives first, transported by their secret love.

Understanding their ancient kinship with Simorgh, the birds are eager to set off but all feel too weak. The hoopoe as a guide says that only one in whom all thought of Self and Faith has died can be called a lover. Except in angels, love causes and thrives on pain. Love leads to Poverty, who shows the way to Blasphemy. Only when Blasphemy and Faith, body and Self are slain can one take to the Way. They must start calmly and heroically. Consider Sheikh Sam'an, for 50 years keeper of Mecca's holy place and a renowned Muslim in every way, is troubled by a dream about worshiping idols in Rome, and sets out with 400 followers to learn the meaning. Seeing a beautiful Christian girl, with whose veiled face all men fall instantly in love, reveals her face to Sam'an and the old man is filled with passion. His disciples find him weeping but cannot bring him to his senses. Struggling, calling on God, Sam'an yields to love. Repenting of his past and proclaiming that God Himself has lit the flame, Sam'an disposes of his followers' arguments, spends a wretched month at her doorstep, and then is mocked as being too old. When she demands four acts of sacrilege to prove his love, Sam'an drinks with with her and his followers lament as wine robs him of intellect and conscience. She will not accept his touch her until he utterly abandons Islam. Accepting Christianity, feeling wretched and disgraced, Sam'an begs to be with her, but she demands riches. Rejected

as a lover, Sam'an accepts a job as the girl's swineherd for a year. He tells disciples to depart and tell people that he is trapped by fate and the Way is dangerous for anyone.

An old friend who stays behind in Mecca asks about the apostate sheikh and upbraids his disciples for abandoning him in his time of need. They return to Rome, praying and repenting, fasting and not sleeping for 40 days and nights. The Prophet appears, saying that he has stayed with Sam'an, broken his chain, and accepted his repentance. They find him dressed in Muslim style, longing for death and grieving over all he has lost. They tell him of the Prophet's intercession. Sam'an is purified, puts on his dervish cloak, and returns to Mecca. The deceiving Christian girl is told in a dream to follow the sheikh and accompany him on the Way. Sam'an accepts her, weeping over her, and teaches her the mysteries of Islam. Longing for "The Friend," she dies and becomes a drop in the Truth's great sea. Such stories are not rare in a world where Self and the secrets of the Way are at war.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 29-75 Analysis

The Conference of the Birds opens with the birds of the world gathering to seek a king. The hoopoe's place as leader is established in the Qur'an ("Ants" 27:20-28), where the hoopoe misses roll call because it is on a mission from King Solomon to investigate rumors that the land of Sheba is ruled by a woman and worships the sun rather than Allah. As the birds are introduced, the hoopoe claims to know Solomon's mind and to be his trusted messenger.

Thirteen species are introduced. Not all of them appear later in the text, presenting their objections to the long and difficult pilgrimage that the hoopoe proposes to see King Simorgh, and other birds not here identified do speak up. At the end of the poem, it is said that 100,000 birds set out, of whom only 30 survive to reach their goal, and these 30 see themselves mirrored in Simorgh —"si morgh," meaning "thirty birds" in Persian. Who or what the Simorgh is at the opening of the poem is purposefully mysterious—for the birds and for the reader, because they lack the spiritual facilities to comprehend. It is easiest to think of Simorgh as God's alter ego or mask, because God Himself in Islam cannot be depicted. The hoopoe adds specific information following the introduction of the bird species, but it is not until the end of the poem, when the birds have reached their goal, that it becomes clear that Simorgh is God's customized self-presentation specifically to a group of thirty birds. He presents himself differently to other quantities of birds or to another species. God in the person or behind the image of Simorgh is the birds' goal in making their pilgrimage. He mirrors the truth of their existence one traveling "The Way" has done away with "Self." Self is the biggest obstacle to reaching Simorgh, and the lion's share of the poem is devoted to describing thosee elements of life, including but not limited to organized religion and the physical body, that constitute Self and how they war against the Way. The birds are gradually taught to shake off, renounce, clear away, sacrifice, slay, and lose their Selves in order to see Simorgh clearly in the end. Until then, He remains veiled, transcendent, all-powerful, magnificent, and mysterious.

A number of the birds are associated with characters common to the Hebrew scriptures and/or the Qur'an. The cock pheasant is associated with Joseph, a favorite character in Islamic literature and mentioned in The Conference of the Birds more than any other character. The francolin is identified with Jesus riding a donkey and "spotless" in spirit. The finch is identified with Mount Sinai and Moses. The nightingale is sweet-throated like the psalmist, King David, but is also charged with melting the steely coat of Self with holy zeal: a major Sufi theme. Within a few verses, the nightingale is the first bird to make an excuse for not making the journey. The parrot is identified with Abraham fighting Nimrod, an instance in which the detailed Qur'anic story differs significantly from the biblical, makes the two figures contemporaries. The peacock once lives in Paradise and is on a pilgrim back again, to be welcomed by Adam. Finally, The pigeon is Jonah's companion in the whale (not Noah's in the ark).

A few other species are identified with characters and/or incidents from Muslim history and literature. The falcon, fiercely jealous of liberty and lured by love; must submit and give up intellect to find peace in Unity's cave and become the Prophet Muhammad's companion. The hawk is associated with the lawgiver Zulgharnin, the partridge with the prophet Saleh, and the turtle dove with Khezr, the freshwater lake on the edge of paradise.

After the introductions, the hoopoe explains in the briefest terms how the Simorgh originates in China and everyone pictures him as he or she sees fit, offering no justification yet for his contention that the Simorgh is the birds' natural king. The hoopoe does, however, make clear that to journey to him is hazardous. After initial enthusiasm, the birds sound off. The general pattern is: 1) excuse(s); 2) the hoopoe's cogent rebuttal; and 3) anecdotes illustrating the rebuttal. The nightingale cites love of the rose, which the hoopoe says is superficial/delusional, and tells a story about a dervish and a princess. The parrot's obsession with Khezr's stream requires no story, simply the hoopoe's remarks about what happens when obsessed. The green motif plays on the Arabic word for this color.

The Peacock, already identified with paradise inspires a story about Adam. The duck, not shown present earlier and, notably the only female bird, is obsessed with water and purity, a major concern in Islam, and elicits no story. The partridge, obsessed with jewels, is told that his excuse is lame and hears about King Solomon and his ring. The mythical homa, whose shadow is said to herald kingship, hears about how King Mahmoud (a recurrent character in The Conference of the Birds) wishes after death that he had never taken the throne. The hawk, happy with his place at court, is also called superficial, and hears about a king and a slave—an eastern version of the William Tell legend from the terrified perspective of the human "pedestal." The heron, obsessed with the sea, is told that he misunderstands the ocean and hears of a hermit questioning the sea. The owl, whose only interest is finding treasure, is charged with blasphemy and idolatry and hears about a miser who posthumously becomes a mouse. Finally, the finch, pleading weakness and timidity, mentions Joseph's well is called a hypocrite, and hears the story of Jacob's dream when Joseph is lost, and how vows can be as easily broken by thinking as by talking.

Other birds protest, showing off "loquacious ignorance" in many words. The hoopoe deigns to add a bit of detail: long ago Simorgh creates birds of every kind by casting shadows on the earth, and each is linked with him. Unless Simorgh's form appears mirrored in their hearts, they cannot bear his beauty or His grace. Basic Sufi doctrine is introduced: God and God's Friend are not identical but being God's shadow, they cannot be moved by life or death. The hoopoe illustrates this with three stories and then, finding the birds still reluctant to set out, offers a morality tale about Sheikh Sam'an, the longest set piece in The Conference of the Birds.

An ultra-pious Muslim is enticed by a beautiful and fickle Christian girl, apostatizes abjectly, and is abandoned by his friends. Another friend admonishes them for leaving and, en route back to Rome, they learn that the Prophet Muhammad has interceded with God to restore the sheikh to the true faith. Touched, the girl submits to Islam and follows them into the desert, where she dies, pained that her spirit is not entirely united with God. The story is rich in details of Muslim and Christian lifestyles, rituals, beliefs, and mutual misconceptions. It also serves as an introduction to the theme of the Self at war with the secrets of the Way.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 75-120

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 75-120 Summary

Convinced not to be held back by Self, thousands of birds set out, elect themselves a leader, guide, judge, and commander, and immediately panic, seeing the trackless desert. The hoopoe tells about Sheikh Bayazid, whom God tells not all are worthy to glimpse His radiant light and most turn back. The Hoopoe knows no fear for Solomon by a glance has given him certainty; ceaseless prayer will serve them once Solomon accepts them. King Mas'oud, finds a poor fisher boy, helps him draw in a great catch, refuses a share, and seats him beside him on his throne. An executed murderer attains paradise because a "friend to God" glances searingly at him. Locked in vanity and without a proven guide, no one can reach heaven, blind. King Mahmoud meets a woodcutter, helps load wood, has his men block every road to force the man to his throne, and makes his men buy the load for an exorbitant price, because royal hands have touched it.

When a cowardly bird admits that he is too weak to continue, the hoopoe admonishes him: everything dies, so why fear? It is better to live by dreams than in "filth and grief." Only when Self and fools are cleared away can the soul penetrate the veil and understand the Way. Pilgrims must embrace poverty and humility. Love forces one to fight and flounder. Sheikh Noughani falls ill en route to Neishapour, and a voice tells him to sweep the square to find a grain of gold to buy bread. When it is quickly gone, huddled in a ruined hut, Noughani sees the broom and sieve and the Lord tells him that work is what makes bread flavorful. A naked simpleton admires others' fine clothes and rejects God's contention that he needs than the sun's warmth. Receiving a coat made of scraps, he objects to the waste; few reach the longed-for home. After walking seven years to Mecca, St. Rabe'eh menstruates, rendering her ritually impure; if she is hindered on the Way, who may not be? One must rise above the whirlpool of dread to find tranquility; Muhammad praises this in a saintly fool living in squalor, only to hear him complain of insects the drive him crazy like Nimrod.

When a bird complains that his sins will hold him back, the hoopoe calls it ignorant to despair of God's benevolence; one must seek mercy and submit. A vicious sinner repents and falls away, but God tells him not to be ashamed to repent again. Hearing God summon someone, Gabriel searches in vain for the voice until God directs him to an idolater in Rome, one who does not know the Way, but whom God's kindness will convert. A Sufi seeks cheap merchandise for free, but God reminds him that He provides all he can want, including the Prophet as a "sign of clemency." Having ignored Gharoun's 70 cries for forgiveness, Moses is reminded that God's grace is infinite and those who accuse sinners are tyrants. When a sinner dies, a pious man refuses to pray for him and is amazed to see him admitted to heaven because of the other's "merciless, disdainful pride." If humans did not sin, God could not show generosity, but has angels pray for souls, which are agents of the sacred Whole—just as the flesh is an agent of

the soul. Whole and part will disappear. Abbasseh notes that on Judgment Day, God will pour mercy on sinners trying to hide from him and will rebuke the angels' jealousy.

When an indecisive bird finds himself caught between extremes of desire, the hoopoe assures him that no one is single-minded—otherwise, prophets would not be needed. A story about Shebli illustrates how all praise and blame are forms of idolatry by having him disappear into the part of Baghdad where male prostitutes work. When two Sufis go to court over a legal claim, the judge demands they take off their "holy dress;" it would be less alarming if they dressed as women. When the King of Egypt hears that a poor man is in love with him, he demands that he choose between exile and death. When he chooses exile, the king has him beheaded for only pretending love; had he not been a traitor, the king would have become his slave.

When a bird complains that his Self is like a robber or an inattentive dog, the hoopoe declares this natural for a Self swollen hellishly with Desire and Pride. A 70-year-old gravedigger wonders why his work has not taught him to behave; Abbasseh laments that prophets make the Self choose between holiness and blasphemy, and the Self dies only when the heart gets the upper hand—for it "the dog" will obey. In his unbelief, a king is ridden like his Self's ass, while a Truth-seeking Sufi rides his Self. Hundreds of such Sufis constitute a "phalanx of the Absolute," which is leaving other Selves behind. One will learn the truth, either here or in hell. Two foxes in love, being hunted, agree to reunite at the furrier's—as a stole.

When a bird asks how to defeat Pride, the hoopoe declares that it remains as long as there is Self. Accomplishing one good desire expels demons. The world is the devil's furnace and cell. Sluggards and the devil each want the other to stay in his own domain. Malek Dinar receives bread from God's hand but obeys the devil. Grief clings when one starts the quest. Sloth, greed, confusion, and lust are tyrants. God may call the world "a nothing," but it ensnares. No one caught in such idleness is a man. When nations head into the fire, courageous heroes run away. Moths worship flame and are burnt. Fire is quenched when one reaches asylum for the soul. A story: a dervish criticizes a rich man for proudly asking mercy from the Lord and tells him to shake free of power, wealth, and pride while there is time. Another: a true believer condemns those who turn to God on their deathbed.

The hoopoe calls a miserly bird blind, childish, and idolatrous. Treasure twists friendships, embitters life, and wastes time. It is like being repeatedly hanged or burnt. The Koran says that to be saved one must abandon all things—including the soul. One must "pass beyond what merely seems." A sheikh advises his nervous novice to throw away his gold and fear no path. The wealthy are like lame mules, lost to the Way, and bound for hell. St. Rabe'eh says that her strength comes from fearing money. A rich man's heir claims strife and misery along with gold. On the difficult Way of perfect Unity, no one looks to his own prosperity. A hermit after living 400 years conversing with God, is distracted by a songbird and rebuked for selling Him "cheap."

A bird brags of possessions too great to risk wandering in the desert, but the hoopoe says the palace is a kennel and a dungeon after death. Once a king spares no expense

in building his palace, but an ascetic warns of a crack that will admit Azra'el (death). A proud merchant builds a mansion and throws a party, to which a beggar is too busy to stop in. Spiders spin webs to snare their food, which the homeowner sweeps away. Those who love the world are likewise gone in an instant. One must see the Way and the heavenly court and seek asylum in its glory. A fool overtakes a ragged dervish in the desert, who complains about the constraint. The Way has led to him. Until the Self is sacrificed, the soul is lost in filth and kept from its goal.

When a bird dreads leaving his beloved, whom he worships, the hoopoe calls him superficial in animal love and blasphemous in evading the quest. The lover's beautiful face will turn to mud and the universe will fade, but those who seek the "unseen Friend" know endless love. Shebli advises a wretch in mourning to befriend God, who cannot die. A merchant regrets selling a slave and agonizes when the new owner will not sell back. When a royal greyhound, decked in satin and gold, sniffs a bone, the king banishes it for ill manners, still adorned, to remind it of its former status. As Hallaj is being dismembered for crying, "I am the Truth," he smears blood on his face lest enemies say he turns white with fear. The world is worth little and the gallows are a "transitory dream." Eloquent Junaid is lecturing when a gang beheads his beloved son; he declares this fated from eternity.

When a bird fears dying, the hoopoe reminds him that all who are born die. The phoenix lives 1,000 years, builds a pyre, sings of death, and bursts into flame, and from the ash a chick emerges. A son weeping at his father's coffin cannot match the corpse for disappointment. A dying viceroy regrets wasting time, and even Solomon is dust. The sleep of death is "turbulent and deep," and thinking about death's bitterness helps people change. The sweet stream water that Jesus drinks is bitter in a jug that has taken many forms over time. Near death, Socrates tells a student to bury him wherever they want, for he has never found himself and doubts they can when he is dead.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 75-120 Analysis

When individual birds' objections have been dealt with, the flock, numbering in the thousands (hundreds of thousands it is revealed at the conclusion of the poem) resolve to set out. Shortly after beginning, they draw lots to elect a guide and leader whose will they accept as infallible. The lot falls to the hoopoe, who alone shows no fear of the desert, having been enlightened by King Solomon. He assures the others that after continual prayer they too may be accepted and enlightened. This describes a major discipline of Sufism.

The hoopoe continues telling parables, brief, simple, allegorical tales imparting a moral lesson. He tends in this second section of the poem to cluster them thematically, more than in the first. In some of the discussions, Attar seems to slip into comments about and admonitions to human beings rather than confining himself to having the hoopoe address the birds.

The first theme is the need for a proven guide. When individual birds, characterized but not named by species, raise questions, concerns, and complaints, the hoopoe responds with pithy tales, the first dealing with the nature of sin, repentance, and the spiritual danger of judging and despair. The Archangel Gabriel displays amazement that God would accept to paradise an idolater, but God replies he does not know the Way but can be converted. Korah's rebellion against Moses (Num. 16) is based on the idea that all nations are holy; God throws Moses' unwillingness to forgive in his face (Korah is named Gharoun in the poem). In the biblical text, God opens the earth to swallow the rebels.

The second theme is single-mindedness and the need to rid oneself of pride. The Self is likened to a rebellious dog. In Muslim societies dogs are rarely pets but are considered roving pests that clean up carrion.

The third theme is defeating Pride, which survives for as long as there is Self. Fire, a major element in pre-Islamic Persian religion (Zoroastrianism) is discussed. The image of the moth drawn fatally and dramatically to flame is repeated later in the poem.

The fourth and fifth themes are the danger of wealth and possessions. The hoopoe likens palaces to dog kennels and dungeons. The Angel of Death, Azra'el, manages to infiltrate anywhere. Spiders being swept away with their victims' bodies, which have nourished them, introduces the concept that everything is destined suddenly to pass away.

In the sixth theme, the hoopoe distinguishes love and beauty from mere lust. Only the "unseen Friend" of God is truly beautiful worthy of love. Death is not to be feared by the righteous; it is everyone's fate. The text graphically depicts Mansur al-Hallaj's martyrdom (922 CE). al-Hallaj is an extreme "antinomian" Sufi, and Sufis see him as being killed for revealing a mystery rather than for heresy. The introduction says that he may have been Attar's teacher through dreams.

The seventh theme deals specifically with bitter and inevitable death. The legend of the phoenix is related. Although a new bird rises from the ashes, it too is fated to live 1,000 years without mate or offspring and then suffer a fiery death. Even wise King Solomon has gone to dust. Mention of Jesus and Socrates is not strictly on point.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 120-166

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 120-166 Summary

When a bird complains of bad luck, the hoopoe calls this arrogance and tells of a man advanced in the Way who refuses sherbet lest it turn him bitter. Hardships are signs of God's love. A kind king shares an apple with his slave who does not complain about its bitterness because it is a gift. A Sufi must keep courage until he dies, thinking about the narrow bridge over hell rather than seeking meaningless happiness. Mahna's sheikh tells a sad old woman that meekness is the only cure and Junaid recommends discovering the heart if one wants happiness. A bat, longing for the sun, surrenders to the Way.

A bird who accepts the hoopoe's guidance is praised. Those who refuse guidance suffer like dogs, while the rest suffer meritoriously and subdue their pride. Returning to his capital, a king finds a festival prepared, but is touched only by the prisoners' displays, which show obedience. A master of the Way dreams that great Bayazid and Tarmazi take him as guide when they hear him sigh. Near death, Kherghan says: forsake idolatry and become God's slave. When a slave who receives a splendid robe wipes mud from his face on the sleeve, he is hanged for lacking dignity.

When a bird asks about purity, the hoopoe says that the Way belongs to the pure and strong, who burn all interests and possessions. A Turkestani sheikh loves his horse and his son, even though they bar him from the Way. Possessions bring. Having foreseen disaster if he ever eats an aubergine (eggplant), Sheikh Kherghani gives in to cravings—and ruffians kill his son. Every encounter is a test. Happiness is martyrdom in God's name. Zuloon in the desert laments finding a closed community ahead of him, but God says that He kills them off and recompenses them in heaven. Pharaoh's sorcerers follow the Way most truly.

A weak bird inspired by the hoopoe hears about God's magnetic force, but that they must be willing to fly beyond the sky. Joseph's would-be buyers include a woman who offers threads merely to boast of having bid. Such aspiration makes a king burn all he owns and be enriched. Ibrahim Adham tells of giving up a realm to gain hundreds of worlds. One must renounce heart and soul and suffer for years. Challenged by Sheikh Ghouri to abandon pride and pomp, King Sanjar claims neutrality on the Way. A fool laments being unable to see outside the box of the world, but when death pulls off its lid, those with wings of aspiration will fly away; the rest remain tormented.

When a bird asks about justice and loyalty, the hoopoe declares that God is just and justice—fighting for others' rights—is more virtuous than prayer or generosity. Learned Ahmad Hanbal consults a beggar when in need of intimacy with God and advises a critic not to be prejudiced. In India, Mahmoud comforts a conquered king whose

weeping he takes for self-pity, but it is really his fears of Judgment Day, for not having converted to Islam until the conquest. One day as he fights an infidel, a Muslim asks for a break to pray; after they resume, the infidel asks the same, but the Muslim prepares to kill him as he does. God's voice intervenes, quoting the Qur'an: "Fulfill your promises." Being called on his false piety, the Muslim weeps and his story converts the infidel. Ten starving brothers beg food from veiled Joseph, who reminds them of their crimes; everyone's sins will thus be revealed.

When a bird asks when audacity is allowable, the hoopoe declares that reverence makes the difference. Those driven mad by love are admired. In Khorosan a good prince provides so well for his slaves that a dervish is amazed and prays that God will do likewise. A naked, hungry madman in the winter takes refuge under a roof; when a tile falls and cuts his head, he riles at God for not dropping "better stuff." A poor many borrows a rich man's ass, which wanders off and is killed. When they go to court, the judge blames the prowling wolf's owner. When famine hits Egypt, a dervish challenges God to make fewer humans. Another dervish, sore from children's rocks, takes refuge in a ruined hut and is hit with hail stones. When he realizes it is not the children still, he repents of all his swearing. Dervishes lead hard lives and should not be judged or reproved. When AlVasati passes a Jewish cemetery and pardons the souls; hauled into court, he claims the pardon is heaven-sent.

When a bird claims to live only for the Simorgh, to have put the Self away, the hoopoe cautions that boasts are not enough. He must draw one to Himself. When Bayazid dies, he comes to a disciple in a dream to say he says nothing to the examining angels but merely waits for God's summons. God works, not humans. A dervish weeps, feeling unworthy of God's great love. The man who stokes the fires in the public bath feeds Shah Mahmoud, is satisfied with his life, hopes the beloved king will visit again, and says that he would not want to reign. A water-seller run dry is refused a portion of another's supply, and yearns for it like Adam for newly-created wheat. One may neither choose nor deny yearning to turn from what one is.

An austere bird claims to be happy with his perfection, but hears from the hoopoe this is hell's pride, diverting him from the Way. Vain Sheikh Abou Bakr is deflated by his donkey's farts and tells his disciples to kill their foolish Self. The devil tells Moses never to speak of "me" or become like him. Novices must leave all earthly cares or be deceived, for the heart hides guilt and shame. A sheikh does not avoid a filthy dog because he is more unclean within. An anchorite gets no pleasure from his prayer, and God tells Moses that he cares too much about his beard; pulling it out only confirms this. Another fool with a huge beard nearly drowns because of it. Pilgrims have no time to "preen and comb." A Sufi washing his clothes thanks a cloud form making them glow bright and buys raisins instead of soap.

A bird who asks the hoopoe's help in conquering fear is told to trust God and avoid the talkative. God alone consoles. An ecstatic dervish dances 20 days after giving his heart to God. A Sufi lives 70 years in bliss, bound to God, ignoring others' faults. One drunkard who can still walk criticizes another who must be carried. An enslaved hero for five years loves a girl and never notices a spot in her eye; as love ceases he asks her

about it. One should accuse only oneself. A drunk accuses the constable of being power-drunk.

Asked what to seek from Simorgh, the hoopoe says only Him, and tells of Bou Ali Roudbar's impatience nearing death, not for heavenly sights and sounds but for God alone. Through David God tell His servants that all creation must pray to have the Lord in their souls. When Shah Mahmoud makes Ayaz king, everyone complains, and Ayaz suggests having him lead the army but dreads being parted. Rabe'eh asks God to favor both enemies and friends and make her His slave in poverty. God tells David that He alone without equivalent must be one's only goal and fill every breath. Shah Mahmoud in Somnat refuses bribes not to destroy the idol Lat. He fears God—but also claims the jewels that survive the fire. When Mahmoud attacks India, he promises the dervishes the spoils if he wins; crazy Boul-Hossein says, when the soldiers object:. keep your promise. And, when a bird asks what to offer Simorgh, the hoopoe suggests something unique: a soul anguished for salvation. Zuleikha orders Joseph whipped and is not fooled by a pretend beating, until heaven sighs deeply. A slave who rises early to pray cannot rouse his master because the feeling must come from within. Sheikh Bou Ali Tousi says when those in paradise tell those in hell about God's radiant face, flames torment the damned less as they long for it. Muhammad suggests the burning, scarring desert s makes the best prayer mat.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 120-166 Analysis

The hoopoe continues fielding birds' questions and complaints and illustrating his answers with stories. The eighth theme is arrogance in a world destined to pass in the blinking of an eye. The translator offers a long footnote about Husain's death at Kerbelah—which creates the division of Muslims into Sunnis and Shiites—to explain why in a story an adept refuses to drink sherbet. A recurring theme—how humans are but atoms in the face of the sun—receives a rather detailed and striking treatment. Ants are more likely to make it to the moon than pilgrims who do not eliminate Self.

The ninth theme is the need for guidance in the spiritual life. Everyone suffers in life, but those who refuse guidance suffer like dogs, while the rest suffer meritoriously and subdue their pride. It is emphasized that even great have a guide: Bayazid is an "ecstatic" Sufi, who also makes scandalous proclamations and claims to have seen himself seated on the throne of God, while Tarmazi is creative thinker about mysticism.

The tenth theme is purity, which is obstructed by possessions and cravings. Several stories have shown great Sufis accepting the death of their children calmly, as an inevitable act of fate, preordained from the beginning. In this section, it appears that Sheikh Kherghani has long foreseen disaster if he ever eats an aubergine (eggplant), but one day gives in to his cravings—and ruffians kill his son and roll his head in as proof. Every encounter is a test. More shocking is God's declaration to Zuloon, when he finds too many people queued up in front of him in the desert, that He kills people off as needed and and recompenses them in heaven.

The eleventh theme is aspiration. God's magnetic force but must be willing to fly beyond the sky. The faithful must renounce heart and soul and suffer for years. In interesting image in terms of the contemporary idiom "thinking outside the box," has humans unable to see outside of the box of the world while its lid is on, but death pulls it off and those who have grown wings of aspiration will fly away, while the rest remain tormented.

The twelfth theme is justice and loyalty. God alone is truly just and justice consists in fighting for others' rights. This is more virtuous than prayer or generosity. When a Muslim sees an opportunity to kill an infidel by stabbing him at prayer, after being allowed time to pray himself, God's voice intervenes, quoting the Qur'an: "Fulfill your promises." Being called on his false piety, the Muslim weeps and his story converts the infidel. This recalls the outcome of the long story of Sheikh Sam'an in Rome.

The thirteenth theme is audacity, specifically, when audacity is acceptable. The hoopoe declares that when one is audacious with reverence it is virtuous. Christians have several times been looked down on as idolaters, while one, because he is ignorant of the Way, is allowed into heaven by God. In this section, the Jews are discussed. AlVasati is seen passing a Jewish cemetery and granting a blank pardon to the souls buried there. Hauled into court, he claims that the pardon being heaven-sent is outside the judge's jurisdiction.

The fourteenth theme opens with a caution about boasting and then concentrates on how God acts to bring about salvation. The paradox at work in this section is that man must also be audacious in seeking God. The fifteenth theme is "hell's pride," showing examples of how the foolish Self gets in the way of salvation. Moses appears twice, being cautioned. The sixteenth theme is consolation, with a sub-theme: avoiding judgment.

The seventeenth theme addresses what one should ask from Simorgh when arriving in His presence. The hoopoe advises: seek only Him. He follows up with stories of those who see past the "two worlds"—earth and heaven—and concentrate only on God. Being apart from God is supremely painful. Pilgrims should pray with every breath. Finally, the hoopoe addresses a related question: what ought a pilgrim to bring the Simorgh as an offering on arrival? Since Simorgh possesses everything, the only gift possible is one's soul, truly yearning for Him. When Sheikh Bou Ali Tousi tells those in hell about God's radiant face, they do not notice the flames tormenting them because they are struck by a terrible longing for something they will never see.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 166-213

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 166-213 Summary

The hoopoe describes seven valleys that lie ahead. The "Valley of the Quest" takes years to pass through, striving, grieving, empty-handed, purifying the heart and leaving everything behind. Then one's heart blazes with the Lord's light and expands and one rushes to drink God and enter oblivion. When the gate opens, both blasphemy and faith are gone. Stories: God breathes into Adam and orders the angels to bow to him; Eblis (the devil) refuses and for his curiosity is required forever to wear a ring of treachery. As Shebli dies, he mourns because he covets God' curse on Eblis. Once someone sees Majnoun in pain searching for Leili in the dust. Yousef of Hamadan teaches that every atom is a Jacob searching for Joseph; even if the goal seems concealed, one must quest onward. Sheikh Mahna in despair unburdens on a peasant, who says seeking truth is hopeless. One must not stop on finding a first gem. Shah Mahmoud throws to a street sweeper a bracelet, which the man rejects because he seeks truth wealth beyond. When someone asks for the door to be opened, Rabe'eh says it has never been closed.

In the "Valley of Love," the fervent pilgrim is plunged into fire and becomes a living flame, seeking the Friend alone. Intellect flees. Stories: A lord leaves everything to be near the boy he loves, a beer-seller, and spends everything he gets to buy from him. When Leili's tribe rejects Majnoun, he dresses in a sheep's skin to crawl near amidst the flock. A beggar falls in love with Ayaz and tells Mahmoud, when he objects, to leave passion to the poor. The beggar likens love to polo: the ball is battered around but eventually scores. A king's love is meaningless. When the beggar dies at Ayaz's feet, Mahmoud despairs. An Arab in Persia faints seeing dervishes. They revive him, make him drunk, steal him blind, and push him out naked. Home in Arabia, he cannot describe what happens. When a young man's beautiful lover falls ill, he wants to kill her so he will have to be put to death and burn for her in hell forever. As Abraham is dying, he fights off Azra'el and rejects Gabriel, willing only to hear God's summons.

In the "Valley of Insight into Mystery," pilgrims follow individual paths, the Self disappears, and in the light of Truth everyone's essence shines. Secrets are unveiled to those of rare courage, but they look on, for the Friend is not yet reached. Knowledge sits in China as a stone, weeping pebbles for not enlightening the world. Ignoring and overvaluing knowledge are both foolish. Those who seek proper wisdom suffer but endure. A lover sleeps, exhausted, and wakes to find himself admonish by his beloved as unworthy, lazy, and ignorant. When a watchman falls in love, he must stay awake night and day. Love and sleeplessness nourish vigilance. Driven away by a sorrowful dervish, Mahmoud takes offense but is told he is far from the Truth.

In the wintry, barren "Valley of Detachment," all search for meaning disappears. Everything that has happened—from Adam's creation to Noah's Ark to Abraham and Nimrod, to Moses being cleansed, to Jesus seeing hidden Truth, to Muhammad rising to heaven's gate—seems trivial. A youth falls down a well and is rescued at the point of death. Everything in the universe is but an "insubstantial dream." Yusuf of Hamadan teaches that all that is, will be, and has ever been is but an atom and the world a drop. This valley is hard and dangerous. When hope lies neither in motion nor rest and past efforts seem meaningless, one must "strive not to strive," renounce the past, and concentrate on what is at hand. When creation disappears, so does fear. This world is like a horoscope drawn in the sand and swept away. Once someone sees a secret world beyond the veil and hears the promise of joy, but then recalls God's prophets are crushed first by disaster. Weak wretches can expect no bliss. A hungry fly enters the bee hive and gets stuck in honey. A dervish falls in love with a girl whose father trades dogs and agrees to work for him a year and then marry. A Sufi admonishes him, but the dervish reminds him of his own leash. The hoopoe mourns leading sleepers.

In the lonely, austere "Valley of Unity," all merge into a "oneness of diversity" (not singularity). Eternity is gone. A dervish likens the world to a wax toy. A pilgrim sees no form but God, lives in, with, and beyond Him, and is lost in Unity. At this point, the pilgrim is lost and dumb, letting God speak. Old Loghman of Sarrakhs points out to God how he has aged and asks to be set free; God tells him that when he is free of mind and thought, he will be a slave no longer. Loghman dances, rejoicing in the freedom of servitude, having lost the distinction between himself and God. When a girl falls into a river, her lover dives in to save her, and she wonders why he risks his life. He says "I" and "you" are gone and they enjoy a single state of Unity. When the slave Ayaz is not moved by the offer of Mahmoud's throne, Hassan calls him an imbecile and an ingrate. When he finishes, Ayaz replies that anything he might have said would have availed nothing, for the king had decided.

In the "Valley of Bewilderment," pilgrims sigh and long for death, having lost Unity and soul and seeing no Whole. They doubt, and they love but do not known whom. A king has a daughter as beautiful as Joseph. Admirers drown in longing. When a handsome slave joins the retinue, she struggles and swoons, but worries how he will react. She confides her shameful secret to her servant girls who bring him, drugged, to her bed and carry him home in the morning. He catches but a glimpse of golden paradise, but is haunted thereafter by what he has seen and lost. A Sufi who mourns constantly for the unknown envies a mother who weeps for her dead daughter. When a Sufi hears a man has lost a key, he tells him he at least knows where the door is. Sufis are deeply bewildered and discontent, enduring delay. Despite 40 pilgrimages to Mecca, Sheikh Masrabad goes to the infidels' shrine in Bewilderment, burning and grieving with discontent.

The "Valley of Poverty and Nothingness" is indescribable oblivion, a world of patterns and opposites. Sinners sink in the sea, while saints are drowned in beauty. The Seer of Tous says that those worn out by love's despair become the loved one's hair. A frenzied lover cries about the Lord's coming to receive for 40,000 years the worthy. They will then return to earth and see themselves not clothed in grace and hate their Self. The

pilgrim yearns to be as God, fleeing to Nothingness and Eternity, crossing the bridge over hell, whose flames are made pure. One must put off every trace of Self to ride into Nothingness. Moths wonder about the truth of the flame's light and one-by-one fly closer until one catches fire and goes beyond knowledge to true comprehension of identity disappearing. A Sufi, struck from behind, tells his assailant that he has been dead for 30 years. The assailant tells him to burn everything—even his shroud—if that is the case and leap into the flames. Before the final veil, one must retreat within oneself to Oblivion.

A prince as lovely as Joseph must be guarded from admirers in public. A simple dervish falls in love with him and sits pining outside the palace, heart broken, with no one to commiserate. One day, as the prince rides out, the dervish calls out, raving, groaning, pounding his head, and the king orders him chained and dragged to execution. The dervish begs God to see the prince's face and, touched, a courtier tells the king, who spares the dervish and sends his son to comfort him. The prince weeps at the sight and, seeing the prince, the dervish writhes, trembles, laughs, and dies, having become Nothingness. Reason must vanish in love's desire, losing Self, seeking poverty and weakness, becoming a shadow in the dark and a drop of water in the sea. Nouri says that one must pass through fire and splendor and cross seven seas, to be breathed in by a giant, invisible whale.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 166-213 Analysis

With no further questioning from the birds, the hoopoe describes the seven allegorical valleys that lie ahead of them. At times, Attar's personality breaks through and at one point he admonishes himself by name for interrupting the narrative with an aside. He describes the qualities of each valley in turn, illustrating his points with parables.

First is the "Valley of the Quest," which ends ends with blasphemy and faith coming to oblivion. The pilgrims are beyond all institutionalized religion. Eblis is shown rebelling at the creation of Adam, and God punishing him for curiosity about this new creature is a distinctly Sufi spin on the tale, which is often repeated in the Qur'an. Eblis is not like the Judeo-Christian Satan an entirely evil character. The end of this first valley comes with someone asking for the door to be opened, but Rabe'eh observes that it has never been closed.

Second is the "Valley of Love." Polo, a sport that originates in ancient Persia is used as an extended allusion to confusion. Abraham is seen willing to commit his spirit to God alone, no to the usual summoning angels.

The third valley is of "Insight into Mystery," where the Self finally disappears and in the light of Truth, everyone's essence shines forth. China as a source of knowledge for mankind, mentioned at the beginning of the poem, reappears as Knowledge personified sits, turned to stone and weeping pebble-like tears over having failed to illuminate humankind.

The "Valley of Detachment" is pictured as wintry and barren. When creation disappears, so does fear. The hoopoe describes the role of the prophets as a sign that no normal person should expect to avoid pain and sorrow. The hoopoe takes a moment to lament that his fate is to lead a flock of sleepers.

In the fifth valley, that of Unity, all merge into a "oneness of diversity" (as opposed to singularity). Eternity itself has passed away. Attar catches himself giving an aside about snakes and serpents, which humans dare not come to judgment without having expelled.

The "Valley of Bewilderment" is best summed up by the story of Sheikh Masrabad, whose seeming abandonment of Islam resembles Sheikh Sam'an earlier and perhaps casts light on his state of mind. Having said that in the "Valley of the Quest" formal religion becomes irrelevant, Attar now states that it comes in the "Valley of Unity." That this is a basic Sufi precept (without denying the superiority of Islam) is repeated throughout the poem.

Finally, the "Valley of Poverty and Nothingness" is reached. It is indescribable and paradoxical. Here, Sirat, the hair-thin bridge over hell, lacks terror, for the flames have been transformed. Boraq, the fabulous beast that carries the Prophet Muhammad to the seventh heaven, is mentioned, with an admonition about what it takes to be his rider. The section ends with a long narrative about yet another personage as beautiful as Joseph and the dervish who falls in love with him. God and the king grant the dervish's dying wish to see the prince's face up close, and the dervish dies laughing triumphantly. The pilgrim at the end of this seventy valley must become like a shadow in the dark or a drop of water in the ocean — Nothing.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 213-229

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 213-229 Summary

As the hoopoe pauses, the birds tremble in fear how difficult the Quest is. A remnant travels for years along the narrow Way. Birds perish in every possible way and some turn aside. Only one in 100,000—30 birds—survives and arrives exhausted, broken, and awestruck. The place is not what they expect. A herald arrives to tell them Simorgh is too great to be bothered with them and sends them home. They remember Majnoun seeking abuse from Leili to the world's praise; they desire be burnt up like the moth in union with Simorgh. Love makes the ragged birds fearless and the proud herald relents. He leads them through 100 veils to the throne, a place of Light of Light. Each is given a piece of paper describing the meaning of their journey and what is yet to be revealed.

The story is about Malek Dar buying Joseph as a slave for a low price. When Joseph later rules in Egypt, his brothers comes begging bread. Joseph holds up Malek Dar's receipt, written in Hebrew, and says that if they can read it, he will give them bread. Seeing the words, the brothers are dismayed and debate what they ought to say. Joseph asks why they do not read. Are they haunted by a dreadful dream? They reply that is is better to keep silent than merit death.

As the birds read the story, they see their lives and actions, what they have done or failed to do, and understand that they have led Joseph into slavery, deprived him of liberty, and put him down a well. How can he be the king to whom all must bow, naked and hungry in the street? Chastened, they are filled with shame, but shame refines their spirits and they see the bright, eternal Celestial Light. They feel free of their past deeds and see in Simorgh's radiant face themselves mirrored. There is a second Simorgh, but the two are one. They dare not ask out loud about the meaning of the mysteries, but Simorgh explains that whoever comes before his face sees his or her own unique reality mirrored. Had they been 40 or 50 birds, that is how he would appear. They have traveled and struggled to see themselves. They also now know that what they earlier trusted is untrue. As they have traveled, Simorgh has held them secure, making the journey for them. As they listen, the birds feel themselves dissolve and Simorgh is alone in silence.

After Hallaj's corpse is burnt, a Sufi stirs the ashes, asking where is he who claims, "I am the Truth." Everything Hallaj has seen or known is now surpassed in Truth's unchanging light. When, 100,000 centuries pass, the birds who have been annihilated happily have their Selves restored. After Nothingness they have attained Eternal Life, states that cannot be described. It would take another book to deal with the analogies by which humans talk about these things imperfectly. People must awaken and realize that knowledge of this world brings no profit. God creates and nourishes humans to grow in wisdom to the point that they can understand His mysteries and then, without

resting, be brought back to Nothingness and absorbed in the "primal void." Each time, blank, the Self is taught again until God excludes it from grace or grants it, when the soul passes humbly into Nothingness.

A king over seven lands, a second Alexander, has a wise minister whose son is beautiful beyond words. The king lusts drunkenly for him and wastes away until he forces him to sit beside him night an day. He watches over the boy and tends to him, weeping, and never lets him out of his presence. The boy is terrorized by this attention but fears running away. The parents are afraid to ask to see their son. One day a lovely girl catches the boy's eye and he falls in love. While the drunken king is passed out, the boy slips to her room and they lie together. At midnight, the king awakens and searches for him. Finding them together, he is jealous and disillusioned after all he has done for the boy. The king orders him bound and dragged to a gibbet beside his throne, flayed, and hung upside down until he is dead. That will show people how to treat the king.

When the boy's father, the minister, hears about this, he sends two slaves to release the boy, knowing that the king will regret it when it is too late. They substitute a convicted murderer, beating him unrecognizable. People dare not mourn out loud. Days later, the king's rage passes and he laments losing the boy's company. He mourns along beside the disfigured corpse, raves, and grovels. After 40 days and nights, the king dreams of seeing the boy, bloodstained, accusing him of ingratitude and pride. No infidel would do this to someone he claims to love. On Judgment Day, the boy vows to get revenge. Close to insanity, the king begs the boy not to forget their friendship or act as he has. Spilling his "spirit's blood" to expiate his guilt, the king curses his fate and is ready to die. As the king is begging God to destroy him, the minister brings in his son dressed as an honored guest in white to kneel before the king. The monarch's tears turn to joy as they are united. No one knows what they talk about together alone. Attar is afraid to tell, for he would die. When the long-sought goal is one, silence is best. Attar having described the Way, it is up to the reader to act.

The Conference of the Birds, pgs. 213-229 Analysis

The final section of the Conference of the Birds reveals how pitifully few survive to see their goal (0.03%). The rest die in innumerable ways, including suicide when they cannot go on. The haughty major domo then tries to turn them away because the Simorgh is too exalted to see riffraff like they. After giving in, he gives them the story of Joseph to read, and in it the birds see their own fowl deeds. Reflecting on Joseph's brothers' treachery, the birds are lightened and see Simorgh—and are amazed that he mirrors them. His name would be different were there more than 30 surviving birds, and he appears to every pilgrim in his or her own visage. Listening to Simorgh, the birds are dissolved into Nothingness.

Hallaj the martyred Sufi mystic is invoked as the type who after death sees the whole Truth. Orthodox Muslims do not believe in reincarnation, but Sufis do, and the process is described as the birds' Selves are restored after 100,000 centuries of Eternal Life.

Memories are wiped clean and the process of learning resumes until finally God accepts or rejects a given soul.

The poem ends with a brutal tale of yet another king who falls in love with a beautiful boy. When the boy betrays him by falling in love with a girl his own age, the king orders him killed most horribly. He is saved surreptitiously and a true criminal tortured in his place. The king nearly goes mad with remorse, and when the boy's father sees that the king is not feigning it, produces the boy safe and beautiful. Attar declines to say more about their joyful reunion, as he does about the Way. In the end, silence is all there is and the reader must put into practice what s/he has read.

Characters

Hoopoe

The hoopoe is the first bird introduced in The Conference of the Birds. Heaven has sent him to lead the other birds in their quest for a king. The hoopoe is beloved of a prophet, trusted by God, has traveled the world, searched for dry land during the Deluge, and explored with Solomon, whom he has also served as dignified friend and messenger to the Queen of Sheba (summarizing the situation in th Qur'an 27:20-28). The hoopoe even has the bismillah (opening words of the Qur'an) etched on his beak. He sports a long erectile crest, called a "feathered spray," for a crown. In the cover painting by Habib Allah (ca. 1600 CE), the hoopoe appears to the right of the peacock and hawk and is being pointed to by the stork's red beak.

The hoopoe wants his fellow birds to accompany him to find Simorgh, their rightful king. He tells them outright that the quest is long and dangerous. He has been lifted above the firmament and knows no fear in the trackless desert, but the frightened pilgrims know plenty, and the hoopoe has first to engage in a question-and-answer session to allay their fears and set right their misconceptions, errors, and sins. The hoopoe is blunt in his conclusions and judgments, but then takes the edge off by telling parables and stories to illustrate his point.

After all of the birds have had their say and the hoopoe has made rebuttal, they set off, only to stop for an election of a leader, for Sufis always need a sheikh (spiritual leader) to teach the group. He is invested with all authority. He continues talking about the Way, emphasizing the need to get rid of Self. He develops seventeen major themes and then describes the topography of the seven metaphorical valleys they must traverse. The poem nearly ended, the hoopoe and his flock of 100,000 finally take wing. A lifetime later, 30 remain alive and show up at the Simorgh's doorstep. There, the birds learn that the trip has been all about seeing their true sides within and they are dissolved into the divine Unity.

Simorgh

The birds' rightful sovereign, Simorgh lives beyond the unidentified Kaf's mountain peak. He is always near them, yet is transcendent. He shares his throne with no one. He is omnipotent, magnificent, unintelligible, mysterious, unfathomable by Reason, and unnameable. Creatures seek him but are deluded by whim. The Conference of the Birds is an allegory about a great flock setting off in quest of the Simorgh and along the Way learning to look into themselves in the Sufi manner. The hoopoe, King Solomon's wise messenger, is elected the birds' leader and functions as a Sufi master. The preparation for the flight fills the lion's share of the poem.

At the onset, the birds are told that Simorgh first appears in China and his fame spreads. People fancy how he looks based on the single feather that he lets float down. It is said to have a counterpart in every soul. Simorgh is the "Friend" of God. In a time of downcast spirits, the birds learn more specifically that the Simorgh long ago creates birds as his shadow, so they have a natural affinity. The truth comes out a lifetime later, as 30 of the 100,000 birds that set off arrive at the Simorgh's doorstep. His servant turns them away, saying the Simorgh is too exalted to receive such vagrants. He relents, however, and takes the birds through 100,000 veils of dark and light to behold the Throne of Thrones. They are amazed to see themselves mirrored, and the Simorgh explains that because they are thirty birds, he appears as thirty birds—si morgh in Persian. If they were forty or fifty, his name and appearance would be otherwise. The journey has been about seeing who they truly are inside: the only authentic form of learning.

Joseph

Joseph is the paragon of male physical beauty in Persian poetry. As such, he is mentioned in The Conference of the Birds more than any other character. The pheasant is associated with Joseph in the opening verses of the poem, inhabiting a "filthy well." In the familiar story, common to the Bible and Qur'an, Joseph becomes the object of his brothers' jealousy. They put him down a dry well while figuring out what to do with him. They auction him—the hoopoe tells about an old woman who bids a few threads, just to be able to boast that she has bid on Joseph. Malek Dar is the successful buyer and takes Joseph down into Egypt. The brothers fake evidence of his death at the teeth of wild beasts and his father Jacob goes into deep mourning.

Joseph becomes overseer of Egypt's granaries (Attar believes that he becomes King). His overcoming advances by the beautiful but cruel Zuleikha (in the Bible, "Potiphar's wife") and confrontation with his brothers are favorite themes in Persian poetry. The hoopoe shows Zuleikha ordering Joseph whipped, but the tenderhearted guard cannot bring himself to strike Joseph. Finally, heaven sighs as the whip descends and Zuleikha is satisfied.

At the end of the birds' quest, they are given the story of Joseph to read and see there all of their own hidden sins. They are too ashamed to speak, but this helps elevate their minds so they can see the truth.

Abraham and Nimrod

According to the Qur'an, the prophet Abraham and Nimrod are contemporaries and archenemies. Nimrod in is defeated when God sends an army of gnats. One enters his brain and the buzzing drives Nimrod insane. In the opening verses of the poem, the parrot is likened to Abraham, risking the flames to cut off Nimrod's head.

Adham

A 9th-century prince from Balkh, a once-Buddhist region of Afghanistan, Abou Eshaq Ibrahim ibn Adham renounces the world and lives as a wandering dervish, much like the Buddha. In the poem, Ibrahim Adham tells someone whining about poverty how he gives up a realm and has gain hundreds of worlds. One must renounce heart and soul and suffer for years.

Bayazid

Also referred to as al-Bistami (d. 874), Bayazid is an "ecstatic" Sufi, who also makes scandalous proclamations and claims to have seen himself seated on the throne of God. He writes of rapture and intoxication. al-Junaid's school, by contrast, emphasizes sobriety. Bayazid's story shows the birds that not all are worthy to come into God's light. When Bayazid dies, he comes to a disciple in a dream to say he says nothing to the examining angels but merely waits for God's summons. God works, not humans.

David

The Hebrew king renowned for his psalms and "songs that make men long to die," David is linked in the opening verses of The Conference of the Birds with the sweet-throated nightingale. David is also a fighter motivated by holy zeal, by which the pilgrim's Self must be melted. God tells David that He alone lacks an equivalent, so he must be one's single goal. Every breath should remember Him. Otherwise, one is an idolater.

Hallaj

An extreme "antinomian" (relativist), Hallaj openly teaches mystical doctrines, the most famous of which, "I am the Truth," gets him brutally executed and cremated, as is seen in the text. It means that the Self is re-absorbed into the sole reality of God. Sufis see him as being killed for revealing a mystery, not for heresy. As Hallaj is being dismembered for crying, "I am the Truth," he smears blood on his face to show he has not turned white with fear. Facing death, heroes know that the world is worth little and the gallows are a "transitory dream."

Hanbal

An important Islamic theologian, Ahmad ibn Mohammad ibn Hanbal (780-845 CE) founds one of the four schools of orthodox Islam. Attar describes him in the poem as renowned, wise, and knowledgeable, but consulting a barefoot beggar at his gate when in doubt. Hanbal admits to being wise in hadith and law, but not intimacy with God.

Jacob

The biblical patriarch, Jacob is shown longing for his favorite son, Joseph, whom his jealous brothers sell into slavery. Persian poetry often uses Jacob as a metaphor for the human soul's longing for God. The hoopoe condemns the finch's hypocrisy of likening himself to Joseph in the well and tells a story about Jacob's dream about his lost son. The angel Gabriel warns Joseph to renounce his tears or be dropped from God's list of prophets. Jacob no longer speaks his beloved son's name, but Gabriel accuses him of sighing it in his heart—which also breaks the vow.

Junaid

A celebrated "sober Sufi, Abou'l Qasim ibn Mohammad ibn al-Junaid writes about the soul's annihilation in God. In one of Attar's stories, Junaid is addressed as "God's prey," yet "free in every way." He then expounds on finding one's heart, the only way for courage not to be wasted.

Kherghan / Kherghani

A 10th/11th century CE Persian Sufi who lives near Bistan, Abou'l HasanKherghan appears in the poem near death, advising people to forsake idolatry to become God's slave, for devotion requires meekness and resolve, and later giving in to cravings for an aubergine (eggplant), which he apparently (but not explicitly in the poem) has forsworn. While he eats, ruffians kill his son. This teaches that every encounter is a test.

Leili and Majnoun

Archetypal lovers, Leili and Majnoun belong to rival tribes, so their love is forbidden. Majnoun is driven mad by love (his name in Arabic means "crazy"), and lives on the margins of civilization among wild beasts. His madness often typifies the sou's longing for God. Leili and Majnoun both die of grief. When Leili's tribe rejects Majnoun, he dresses in a sheep's skin to crawl near amidst the flock.

Mahmoud and Ayaz

The Sultan of Ghazna, who reigns Afghanistan in 998-1030, Mahmoud expands his territory by invading northwest India. Mahmoud is a poet and surrounds himself with poets and philosophers. Attar treats the fanatical, cruel, fickle tyrant as a benign ruler. Mahmoud's relationship with his slave, Ayaz ibn Aymaq Abou-Najm, is a common theme in Persian poetry. He is raised to highest honor by his king and a metaphor for the mystic's relationship with God. Attar refers to Ayaz's story frequently in this poem. When Shah Mahmoud makes Ayaz king, everyone complains. Ayaz suggests having him lead the army but dreads being parted for a day; pilgrims must long for God like this.

Other stories that the hoopoe tells about Mahmoud include his encounter with a poor fisher boy, when helps him haul in a great catch for his family, and then ignores his courtiers' scorn to seat him on his throne; when Mahmoud comforts a conquered king whose weeping he takes for self-pity, but it is really his fears of Judgment Day, for not having converted to Islam until the conquest; attacking Somnat and refusing bribes not to destroy the idol Lat, for Mahmoud fears God—but also claims th jewels that survive the fire; one must destroy the idols in the heart. When Mahmoud attacks India, he promises that if he wins, the dervishes may have the spoils, and leaves it to crazy Boul-Hossein to decide, when the soldiers object. The madman says to keep his promise. Shah Mahmoud throws to a street sweeper a bracelet, which the man rejects because he seeks truth wealth beyond.

Moses

The Hebrews' deliverer from Egyptian slavery and lawgiver at Mount Sinai, Moses is associated with fire. In the opening verses of the poem, the finch is likened to Moses. Having ignored Gharoun's 70 cries for forgiveness, Moses is reminded that God's grace is infinite and those who accuse sinners are tyrants. The devil tells Moses never to speak of "me" or become like him. An anchorite gets no pleasure from his prayer, and God tells Moses that he cares too much about his beard; pulling it out only confirms this. In the wintry, barren "Valley of Detachment," reference is made to Moses' being cleansed.

Muhammad

The final prophet of Islam is mentioned but occasionally in The Conference of the Birds, most notably when he intercedes with God to redeem Sheikh Sam'an from his conversion to Christianity in Rome. Muhammad also praises the tranquility of a "saintly fool" living in squalor, only to hear that the man is tormented by insects like Nimrod. Reference is made to Boraq, the fabulous beast that carries the Prophet to the seventh heaven, with an admonition about what it takes to be his rider.

Rabe'eh

One of Islam's most important female mystics, Rabe'eh bint Esmail al-Adawiya lives in the 8th century. She is sold into slavery as a child and spends most of her years in poverty in Basra. Gaining fame for piety, she is visited by mystics and is credited with introducing the theme of Divine Love into Islamic mysticism. Rabe'eh is mentioned in the poem, several times with the honorific "Saint," several times. After walking seven years to Mecca, she menstruates, rendering her ritually impure to enter the sacred confines. The hoopoe asks, if she is hindered on the Way, who may not be? Later, she tells a sheikh of Basra's that her strength comes from fearing money. Rabe'eh asks God to favor her enemies and her friends and make her God's slave in poverty.

Sam'an

A renowned sheikh who travels to Rome and becomes a Christian in the longest story in The Conference of the Birds. Sheikh Sam'an is for 50 years the keeper of Mecca's holy place, a teacher to 400 pupils, a strict ascetic, a theoretician, and an attraction to astonished saints and clerics. He "split[s] religious hairs in argument," heals the sick, reads people's hearts, and symbolizes Belief, until he dreams about living in Rome and worshiping idols. Determined to resist and learn the meaning of his dream, Sam'an travels to Rome with 400 followers. There he falls in love with a Christian woman, commits every Muslim blasphemy to prove his love, converts to Christianity, and still is not acceptable to her. The Prophet Muhammad intercedes with God for Sam'an, and his good sense and standing in Islam are restored. His followers, who have given up on him and returned to Mecca, find him on his way out of Rome. The unnamed girl sees the light and follows Sam'an into the desert, is instructed in Islam, and dies, desiring to achieve Unity with God.

Sanjar

The Seljuk ruler of Khorasan (1096-1157), Sanjar is crowned king in Baghdad in 1119. In his later years, rebellions are frequent. The Conference of the Birds alludes to a rivalry with Sheikh Ghouri, who challenges Sanjar to choose the Way.

Solomon

The great and wise king of the Jews, Solomon inspires the hoopoe, who has serves as his secret messenger to the Queen of Sheba. Solomon by a glance has given the hoopoe certainty beyond prayer, which is needed, ceaselessly, but ignorance leaves only when Solomon accepts one.

Tarmazi

Called by scholar A. J. Arberry "one of the outstanding creative thinkers of Islamic mysticism," Abou Abdallah Mohammad ibn Ali ibn al-Hosain al-Hakim al-Tarmazi is a 9th/10th century CE teacher at Neishapour, the author's home town. Tarmazi appears in the poem with Bayzaid submitting to a master Sufi's guidance.

Zulnoon

Abou'l-Faiz Thauban ibn Ibrahim al-Mesri is a 9th-century CE Egyptian who is considered the first and most important of the Islamic mystics. He is for a time imprisoned for heresy at Baghdad. In the poem, Zuloon talks about how God rewards asceticism after death.

Objects/Places

Baghdad

The biggest city in modern-day Iraq, Baghdad is one of the great historic centers of Islam. The hoopoe sets one of his stories there: as a Sufi tries to get merchandise for free, God tells him that He gives him everything he can want, including the Prophet Muhammad as a "sign of clemency" for sinners and blasphemers. Another story features Shebli, who disappears into the part of town when male prostitutes, grown and boy, operate. He talks about laying aside all praise and blame, for these are forms of idolatry. In Baghdad, eloquent Junaid is lecturing when a gang beheads his beloved son, but he says that is fated from eternity.

Blasphemy

In normal parlance, "blasphemy" denotes an act of contempt towards God. The term, however, is used in The Conference of the Birds as a synonym (or perhaps euphemism) for Christianity in contradistinction to Islam, the one true faith. Trying to rally the birds to seek the Simorgh, the hoopoe declares that the pilgrim can find the Way only when Blasphemy/Faith and body/Self are slain. This is a basic Sufi principle, that the experience of God transcends formal religion. The story of Sam'an shows a devout, learned old Muslim abandoning his faith for the love of a beautiful Christian girl, who demands that he prove his love by burning the Qur'an, drinking wine, ignoring Islam, and bowing down to images.

China

China is where, one moonless night, the Simorgh first appears and drops the single feather by which his fame spreads everywhere. This feather is said to remain on view in China, and a proverb says to seek knowledge in China. Late in the poem Knowledge personified is shown sitting in China, turned to a stone, weeping pebbles over failing to enlighten the world.

Homa

A mythical Persian bird, the homa is said to mark future kings by letting its shadow fall upon them. A homa sings to the other birds offering excuses for not seeking Simorgh about his uniqueness.

Kaf

Kaf is a mountain peak beyond which King Simorgh lives.

Kausar

Kausar is a mythical stream flowing through Paradise.

Khezr

In pre-Islamic legend, Khezr is an immortal guarding a spring whose waters bestow immortality. "Khezr" derives from al-Khadir, "the green man" in Arabic.

Mahna

A small town in Kharavan Province, Persia, Mahna is famous for the 11th-century CE poet Abou Sa'id Aboul Kheir, creator of the mystical themes and metaphors in Persian poetry like The Conference of the Birds. He is referred to obliquely as the "sheikh of Mahna" rather than by name as the hoopoe explains about prayer.

Mecca

The holiest city of Islam, Mecca is located in modern Saudi Arabia. It owes its prominence to giving birth to the Prophet Muhammad. All able-bodied Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca during their lifetime. The central ritual involves circling the gray-stone Ka'abah at the center of the great mosque. In one of the hoopoe's stories, Sheikh Sam'an is depicted as for 50 years the keeper of this holy place as well as a renowned teacher, ascetic, theoretician, mystic, healer, and seer of hearts, until he dreams about worshiping idols in Rome. References to Mecca's pre-Islamic religion are found in th poem (e.g., the goddess Lat).

Neishapour

Neishapour is one of the greatest cities in Persia and home to Islamic colleges. Farid al-Din Attar is born and is buried there. Charged with heresy for his poetry, Attar for a while is banished from Neishapour but returns before his death. Encouraging the pilgrim-birds, the Hoopoe tells the story of Sheikh Noughani, who falls ill in Neishapour and is told by God to sweep the square to find a grain of gold with which to buy himself bread.

Rome

The center of Roman Catholicism, Rome appears to the renowned Sheikh Sam'an, keeper of the Ka'abah in Mecca, in dreams. Sam'an with 400 disciples then journeys there to discover the meaning. Rome presents a "gentle landscape of low hills and trees." Sam'an falls in love with a beautiful woman, converts to Christianity, commits every Muslim sacrilege, and she still will not marry him. The Prophet Muhammad

intercedes for Sam'an and he returns to Islam, and the woman sees the light, flees Rome, and converts in the desert.

Sufism

An esoteric religious and philosophical system stemming from Islam, Sufism is so integral to the understanding and appreciation of The Conference of the Birds that translator Dick Davis devotes much of his Introduction to it. Sufism is handed down within orders of "adepts." Sufis "retreat into paradox" both because they feel that their beliefs are truly inexpressible and because they fear reprisal from orthodox Muslims. Sufism is more a life discipline than a doctrine, following the prescribed "Way," whose stages Attar describes in the poem. The basic tenets of Sufism are: 1) only God truly exists; everything else his his "shadow" or emanation; 2) religion is useful for reaching Truth beyond distinct religions, but Islam is the most useful religion; 3) the good/evil distinction is meaningless to God, who knows only Unity; 4) trapped in the body, the soul recognizes affinity with God; 5) guided by God's grace, the awakened soul can follow the "Way" that leads to annihilation in God. The poem illustrates the Sufi emphasis on poverty and abstinence, the pursuit of love, obedience, and devotion to God over obedience to the law, the need to let go of Self (always capitalized) and realize the Divine unity. The great flock of birds shows the Sufi preference for learning in groups, led by a master who teaches through parable and allegories how to reach the Truth and know oneself.

Themes

Self

From the opening words to the revelations when the pilgrims reach Simorgh's paradise, The Conference of the Birds stresses that pilgrims must shake off, renounce, clear away, sacrifice, slay, lose... Self and fly to Simorgh. When they do so, Simorgh—for the thirty surviving birds their specific stand-in for God; each pilgrim or group of pilgrims sees their own image, as in a mirror—sacrifices his inner soul for them. Until then, He remains veiled, transcendent, all-powerful, magnificent, and mysterious. Only when Self has died can a pilgrim be called a lover. Organized religion and the body must also be slain before one can take to the Way, because Self and the secrets of the Way are continually at war. Convinced by their spiritual guide, the hoopoe, not to be held back by Self, thousands of birds set out, and the hoopoe continues his teaching: only when Self (and fools) are cleared away can the soul penetrate the veil and understand the Way. Pilgrims do this by embracing poverty and humility. Love forces one to fight and flounder.

When a bird complains that his Self is like a robber or an inattentive dog, the hoopoe declares this natural for a Self swollen hellishly with Desire and Pride. In one of the most pointed parables, an old gravedigger finds himself amazed that 70 years of burying corpses has not made him stop, take stock of his life, and behave differently. The hoopoe finds dogs an apt metaphor for Self. It will obey only the Heart, once it gains the upper hand. Another animal image invoked is the ass, which Self can ride or be ridden by. ,Hundreds of wise Sufis are riding their Selves as a "phalanx of the Absolute," leaving other Selves behind. Pride remains for as long as there is Self, and until the Self is sacrificed the soul is lost in filth and kept from its goal. Boasts are not enough, for God must draw one to Himself.

In the "Valley of Insight into Mystery," pilgrims follow individual paths, the Self disappears, and in the light of Truth everyone's essence shines. The poem's eschatology shows the worthy being dissolved into God for 40,000 years and then returning to earth and see themselves not clothed in grace, which teaches them truly to hate their Selves. God creates and nourishes humans to grow in wisdom to the point that they can understand His mysteries and then, without resting, be brought back to Nothingness and absorbed in the "primal void." Each time, blank, the Self is taught again until God excludes it from grace or grants it, when the soul passes humbly into Nothingness.

Love (Eros)

Farid al-Din Attar talks frequently about love in The Conference of the Birds, most often in terms of forbidden loves involving caste, homosexuality, and religion. Attar likes to show the downtrodden as spiritually superior to the great, which is a common Sufi

theme. The first bird to object to making the Quest is the nightingale, who pleads that he cannot be parted from his beloved rose. The spiritual leader, the hoopoe, says that this is superficial and delusional, and talks of beauty fading and laughter at the nightingale, not for him. Love can be sadistic, as when a monarch makes the beautiful young slave who he loves quake with fear as he shoots apples off his head. The sea offers a metaphor for blind love: one does not see it is full of sharks, its water salty, treacherously sucking down ships and drowning crews. Except in angels, love causes and thrives on pain and leads to Poverty. A lover's beautiful face turns to mud as the universe fades away, but those who seek the "unseen Friend" know endless love. Hardships are signs of God's love and those driven mad by love (dervishes) are admired. Love is fickle; after loving a girl for five years without noticing a spot in her eye, a man falls out of love and asks her when it appears.

The "Valley of Love" is marked by fire. Intellect flees. The hoopoes' stories there illustrate desperation, misunderstanding, vigilance, and the loss of any sense of "I" and "You" as the state of Unity is achieved. In the "Valley of Bewilderment," pilgrims lose Unity and love without knowing whom. A king's beautiful daughter swoons over an equally beautiful slave whom her servants drug and smuggle into her bed for a night he barely remembers afterwards but for which he yearns. Another prince, also as lovely as Joseph, becomes the target of a simple dervish's love. The scandal of the dervish calling out and raving convinces the king to have him publicly executed, but the victim's prayers to see the prince's face gets him spared, and the dervish dies in ecstasy, seeing the prince's face. Reason must vanish in love's desire, losing Self, seeking poverty and weakness, becoming a shadow in the dark and a drop of water in the sea.

There are several stories about King Mahmoud and his beloved slave Ayaz. In the first, Mahmoud is transported to Ayaz's sickbed by their secret love. A beggar falls in love with Ayaz and tells Mahmoud, when he objects, to leave passion to the poor. When the beggar dies at Ayaz's feet, Mahmoud despairs. Sheikh Sam'an, a pillar of Islam, falls instantly in love with a beautiful Christian girl and proclaims that God Himself has lit the flame. Despite his performing four acts of sacrilege to prove his love, she rejects Sam'an because he is poor and relegates him to the job of swineherd. The King of Egypt hears that a poor man is in love with him, he demands that he choose between exile and death. When he chooses exile, the king has him beheaded for only pretending love; had he not been a traitor, the king would have become his slave.

The final story shows a king lusting drunkenly for a boy and wasting away until he sits beside him and never lets him out of his presence. The boy is terrorized but fears running away. One day a lovely girl catches the boy's eye and he falls in love. While the drunken king is passed out, the boy slips to her room and they lie together. Finding them together, the king orders him flayed and hung upside down beside his throne to show people how to treat the king. There is a happy ending, which Attar refrains from detailing, leaving the most touching image of love two foxes who, being hunted, agree to reunite at the furrier's—as a stole.

Intoxication

The Conference of the Birds provides plenty of examples of why Islam forbids the consumption of alcoholic beverages. The most striking is the story of Sam'an, a true pillar of Islam, keeper of the Ka'aba, renowned teacher sought out by mystics. After a troubling dream, Sam'an journeys to Rome, where he falls instantly in love with a beautiful Christian girl. She demands that he perform four acts of sacrilege to prove his love, including drinking with with her. His disciples lament as they see wine robs him of intellect and conscience. Sam'an abandons Islam, accepts Christianity, is still not considered marriage material, and ends up tending her swine for a year (until God, through the Prophet Muhammad's intercessions, returns him to his senses and accepts him back into Islam—a true deus ex machina ending).

In other stories, one drunkard who can still walk criticizes another who must be carried. Another public drunk accuses the constable who arrests him of being power-drunk. An Arab in Persia is made drunk by dervishes who steal him blind, and leave him naked to wander home, unable to describe what has happened. A great king lusts drunkenly for his minister's beautiful son, forces him to sit beside him night an day, and never lets him out of his presence. The boy falls in love with a beautiful girl, and sees his chance to be with her when the king passes out in his cups. The king wakes up furious and condemns his beloved to a horrible death. Only when he sobers up does he regret his actions, and is gratified that the boy's father has anticipated this and tricked him by substituting another victim. Beer makes one appearance, when a lord abandons everything to be near the boy whom he loves, who happens to be a beer-seller. The lord falls into destitution, seeking every opportunity to buy beer from him.

Style

Point of View

Farid al-Din Attar is a Persian poet who completes writing The Conference of the Birds in 1177 CE. Attar studies theology, is attached to the shrine of the Imam Reza at Mashhad, and later travels widely, seeking knowledge, and collecting an important volume of Muslim saints' lives. Settling in his hometown, Neishapour, Attar is charged with heresy for his poetry, is banished, but continues writing about mystical poets who are persecuted. He returns to Neishapour before he dies ca. 1220.

The 4,500-line poem offers an allegorical pilgrimage by the birds to see their king. As a narrative, it is generally told in the third person past tense. Most of the time, Attar speaks through a hoopoe bird, which in the Qur'an ("Ants" 27:20-28), undertakes a mission for King Solomon to investigate rumors that the land of Sheba is ruled by a woman and worships the sun rather than Allah. As the birds are introduced in The Conference of the Birds, the hoopoe leads off and mentions Solomon as his source of wisdom and strength. In time, after he has told innumerable stories to address the birds' complaints, excuses, and fears, the hoopoe is formally elected their leader and continues explaining the spiritual way to them. During the question-and-answer session, the hoopoe addresses individual birds directly in the second person.

Occasionally, Attar gets caught up in his admonitions to human readers and leaves the hoopoe behind. This most often occurs when dealing with Self and the most heavily philosophical parts. It makes little difference which narrator is involved. While describing the "Valley of Unity," Attar catches himself giving an aside about snakes and serpents, and tongue-in-cheek goads himself back on topic.

Setting

The Conference of the Birds is an allegory of how a Sufi sheikh (spiritual master) helps his pupils see the reality that lies within them. The charming short stories used to illustrate the principles are for the most part set in Farid al-Din Attar's native Persia (he lives in the 12th century), but ranges as far west as Rome, the center of infidelity, as far south as Mecca, the center of fidelity, west into India, and north into Afghanistan and China. Several tales are set in Baghdad, the great Muslim cultural center on the banks of the Tigris River in modern Iraq. Others in Neishapour, Attar's hometown. Mahna, a small town in Kharavan Province, Iran, is famous for the 11th-century CE poet Abou Sa'id Aboul Kheir, creator of the mystical themes and metaphors of Persian poetry.

Much of the poem takes place in mythical lands and distant times. Kaf is a mountain peak beyond which King Simorgh lives, and Kausar is a mythical stream flowing through Paradise. Attar draws heavily from the legends of the Qur'an, many of which are also found in the Judeo-Christian Bible, often with different emphases. Mecca and in

particular the Ka'abah, whose circling is the central rite of Muslim pilgrimage, is lovingly described. Included among the religious places visited are: the primordial paradise in which Adam is created and shines forth, and the angels are required to honor him; Egypt, where Joseph is sold into slavery only to become the ruler and from which Moses leads his enslaved people, Mount Sinai, where Moses receives the law; Jerusalem, from which the Prophet Muhammad ascends to heaven; and the hair-breadth bridge over the chasm of hell.

Language and Meaning

The Conference of the Birds is originally composed in Persian. Translator Dick Davis says that Farid al-Din Attar's language presents few difficulties because Attar maintains a narrative line and is sparing in the use of metaphor. In the Introduction, Davis explains that Persian poets "juxtapose" words with "potent associations" to deepen and widen meanings rather than producing visual images as in English poetry. Attar uses the stock vocabulary and images of epic poetry, "unrestrained" hyperbole, and "anaphora," the repetition of a word or phrase throughout a passage, which sounds peculiar in English. Davis has chosen to render the poem into "heroic couplets," which he believes best approximate Attar's masnavi meter. This consists of 22-syllable lines with rhymes occurring at the 11th and 22nd syllables. Each is "end-stopped," i.e., self-contained in thought. Davis divides each Persian line into a couplet. One is often left wondering what the original says when Davis achieves a particularly satisfying rhyme in English.

Portrayed as a sheikh (spiritual master) leading a flock of feathered pupils to enlightenment, the hoopoe uses the traditional methods (parable, allegory, and metaphor) of helping them learn the truth that lies within and in some sections shows the Sufi proclivity for being obscure. All of the key themes of Sufism are touched upon: abstinence, contemplation, intimacy, love, meditation, passion, patience, poverty, presence, purity, renunciation, tranquility, and trust, and particularly the battle between Self and Unity. Attar draws heavily from the legends of the Qur'an, many of which are also found in the Judeo-Christian Bible, often with different emphases.

Structure

Farid al-Din Attar's The Conference of the Birds in approximately 4,500 lines of masnavi verse offers an allegory of how a Sufi sheikh (spiritual master) brings his pupils to enlightenment. Translator Dick Davis has omitted the formal invocation and epilogue and published just the body of the poem, which previous English translators have bowdlerized and rearranged. Davis explains this and key aspects of Sufism without which the reader would be hopelessly lost in an Introduction that should not be skipped over.

Individual stories are supplied brief descriptive headings. The end of blocks of related material is marked with a leaf graphic. Otherwise, the poem reads straight through without division. The framework is: 1) the birds of the world gather to seek a king, are

told by the hoopoe that they already have a faraway king—the Simorgh—who can be reach only by a hazardous journey. After initial enthusiasm, the birds offer excuses, which the hoopoe counters with anecdotes showing that their desires and fears are mistaken. 2) The birds elect the hoopoe as their leader, but ask about the Way before departing. In response, the hoopoe offers more anecdotes. 3) The hoopoe describes in detail the Seven Valleys of the Way through which the flock is about to journey. 4) A tiny remnant of the birds arrives at the Simorgh's court, are initially turned back, but then enter to see themselves in a mirror—si morgh in Persian meaning "thirty birds." Some 100,000 centuries later, the birds are restored to the life of Self to begin another cycle. 5) The story of a king who orders his beloved killed is told, allowing Attar to declare silence is best and urge readers to put into practice what he has written.

Quotes

"Dear hoopoe, welcome! You will be our guide; / It was on you King Solomon relied
"To carry secret messages between / His court and distant Sheba's lovely queen.
"He knew your language and you knew his heart— / As his close confidant you learnt the art
"Of holding demons captive underground, / And for these valiant exploits you were crowned." The Conference of the Birds, pg. 29.

"The hoopoe finished, and at once the birds / Effusively responded to his words.
"All praised the splendour of their distant king; All rose impatient to be on the wing;
"Each would renounce the Self and be the friend / Of his companions till the journey's end.
"But when they pondered on the journey's length / They hesitated; their ambitious strength
"Dissolved: each bird, according to his kind, / Felt flattered but reluctantly declined." The Conference of the Birds, pg. 35.

"He gave his heart into the Christian's hands; / His mind had fled, he bowed to her commands,
"And from those hands he took the proffered bowl; / He drank, oblivion overwhelmed his soul.
"Wine mingled with his love—her laughter seemed / To challenge him to take the bliss he dreamed.
"Passion flared up in him; again he drank, / And slave-like at her feet contented sank—
"This sheik who had the whole Koran by heart / Felt wine spread through him and his faith depart;
"Whatever he had known deserted him, / Wine conquered and his intellect grew dim;
"Wine sluiced away his conscience; she alone / Lived in his heart, all other thoughts had flown." The Conference of the Birds, pg. 65.

"Whoever knows love's path is soon aware / That stories such as this are far from rare.
"All things are possible, and you may meet / Despair, forgiveness, certainty, deceit.
"The Self ignores the secrets of the Way, / The mysteries no mortal speech can say;
"Assurance whispers in the heart's dark core, / Not in the muddied Self—a bitter war
"Must rage between these two. Turn now and mourn / That your existence is so deeply torn!" The Conference of the Birds, pg. 75.

"A sinner died, and, as his coffin passed, / A man who practiced every prayer and fast
"Turned ostentatiously aside—how could / He pray for one of whom he knew no good?
"He saw the sinner in his dreams that night, / His face transfigured with celestial light.
" 'How did you enter heaven's gates,' he said, / 'A sinner stained with filth from foot to

head?'
" 'God saw your merciless, disdainful pride, / And pitied my poor soul,' the man replied." The Conference of the Birds, pg. 90.

"A man who lived by digging graves survived / To ripe old age. A neighbor said: 'You've thrived
" 'For years, digging away in one routine— / Tell us the strangest thing you've ever seen.'
"He said: 'All things considered, what's most strange / Is that for seventy years without a change
" 'That dog, my Self has seen me digging graves,
" 'Yet neither dies, nor alters, nor behaves!'" The Conference of the Birds, pg. 96.

"A perfumed wood was burning, and its scent / Made someone sigh with somnolent content.
"One said to him: 'Your sigh means ecstasy; / Think of the wood, whose sigh means misery'." The Conference of the Birds, pg. 110.

" 'Bravo!' the hoopoe cried. 'By far the best / Decision is the one that you suggest;
" 'Whoever will be guided finds relief / From Fate's adversity, from inward grief;
" 'One hour of guidance benefits you more / Than all your mortal life, however pure.
" 'Those who will not submit like lost dogs stray. / Beset by misery, and lose their way—
" 'How much a dog endures! and all in vain; / Without a guide his pain is simply pain.
" 'But one who suffers and is guided gives / His merit to the world; he truly lives.
" 'Take refuse in the orders of your guide, / And like a slave subdue your restive pride." The Conference of the Birds, pg. 125.

"When Bayazid had left the world behind, / He came that night before the dreaming mind
"Of one of his disciples, who in fear / Asked how he'd fared with Monkar and Nakir.
"He said: 'When those two angels questioned me / About the Lord, I told them I could see
" 'No profit in our talk—if I should say / "He is my God", my answer would betray
" 'A proud, ambitious heart; they should return / To God and ask him what they wished to learn—
" 'God says who is His slave; the slave is dumb, / Waiting for Him to say: "Good servant, come!"'
If grace is given you from God above, / Then you are wholly worthy of his love;
"And if He kindles joy in you, the fire / Will burst out and its flames beat ever higher—
"If is His works that act, not yours, you fool; / When will these dunces understand His rule!" The Conference of the Birds, pg. 145.

"Since sleepless watches nourish vigilance, / Sleep little, guard your heart with diligence —
"What shall I say? What words have ever found / A means to save the sinking? You are drowned!
"But lovers journey on before us all; / Intoxicated by their love, they fall—
"Strive, drink as they have drunk, discover love, / The key to this world and the world above;
"A woman will become a man, a man / A sea whose depths no mortal mind may scan." The Conference of the Birds, pg. 183.

"I see both worlds and in that light I seem / Like water lost in water's moving stream.
"All that I ever lost or ever found / Is in the depths of that black deluge drowned.
"I too am lost; I leave no trace, no mark; / I am a shadow cast upon the dark,
"A drop sunk in the sea, and it is vain / To search the sea for that one drop again.
"This Nothingness is not for everyone, / Yet many seek it out as I have done;
"And who would reach this far and not aspire / To Nothingness, the pilgrim's last desire?" The Conference of the Birds, pg. 213.

"And silently their shining Lord replies: / 'I am a mirror set before your eyes,
" 'And all who come before my splendour see / Themselves, their own unique reality;
" 'You came as thirty birds and therefore saw / These selfsame thirty birds, not less nor more;
" 'If you had come as forty, fifty - here / An answering forty, fifty would appear;
" 'Though you have struggled, wandered, traveled far, / It is yourselves you see and what you are.'" The Conference of the Birds, pg. 218.

Topics for Discussion

How does Solomon confer leadership on the hoopoe? Is the hoopoe a competent leader for the birds?

How is Joseph depicted in The Conference of the Birds? What aspects are most emphasized—and to what ends?

Why is the duck alone among the birds specified as female? What does this say about her excuse for not wanting to undertake the Quest?

How does Attar envision reincarnation?

With which of the hoopoe's stories do you most identify and with which the least? Why?

What is the function of the survey of the seven valleys?

Can a journey that suffers such extreme casualties be worth it? Justify your answer with examples of what the survivors learn and/or receive.