

# The symbolism of birds in z.z. packer's the ant of the self essay sample

[Psychology](#), [Abuse](#)



The Symbolism of Birds in Z. Z. Packer's "The Ant of the Self" In Western literature, birds are often used to symbolize humans. Birds' anatomy, behavior, and perceived emotions combine to make the bird a useful symbol of humans, their thoughts, and their emotions. Z. Z. Packer adds to this list of more commonly used similarities between birds and humans by endowing the birds in her short story, "The Ant of the Self", with the gift of speech. By doing so, Z. Z. Packer highlights her use of a squawking assortment of colorful African birds as a symbol for Spurgeon. The birds serve as a catalyst for the story, giving rise to Spurgeon's and his father's trip to the Million Man March. As the duo makes their way from Jasper, Indiana to Washington, D. C., Packer introduces a succession of likenesses between Spurgeon and the birds. These likenesses show the extent to which the birds function as a symbol for Spurgeon. Most importantly, however, the birds allow the reader to more intimately examine the father-son relationship between Ray Bivens Jr. and Spurgeon.

Upon Ray Bivens Jr.'s forceful capture and caging of a colorful menagerie of African birds from his ex-girlfriend's house, similarities between Spurgeon and the birds become apparent. These similarities are not accidental, nor are they surprising. Birds are often used as a symbol for humans not only because they possess great physical and behavioral human resemblance, but also because we believe that we are able interpret their thoughts. Birds lend themselves to becoming symbols because "they seem so like us in many ways" (Mynott 282). Mynott clarifies his statement that birds are "like us" by explaining that birds "have roundish heads with two eyes in front" and engage in behavior to which we believe we can relate (282). Mynott also

acknowledges that birds can be bipedal. Because of these anthropoid physical traits and relatable behaviors, we are led to believe that birds experience feelings and emotions which are similar to our own. Perceived to be similar in so many ways, we further believe that we may interpret birds' thoughts or feelings.

The birds in *The Ant of the Self* are indeed used to symbolize a human. However, their similarities to a particular character, Spurgeon, go beyond these more general human similarities. Physically similar and behaviorally relatable, the birds in *The Ant of the Self* are also talking birds, and therefore symbolize Spurgeon. Like Spurgeon, the species which ZZ Packer mentions are talented speakers. While the talking birds are only able to screech nonsensical and out-of-place remarks such as " Advil works [...] better than Tylenol," this ability nevertheless sets them apart from other bird species (Packer 97). Spurgeon's speaking ability also sets him apart from those of his own species. Spurgeon is a member of his school's debate team, and is capable of speaking on " debate topic[s] like U. S.-China diplomatic relations," a talent which sets him apart from his peers (Packer 86). In addition, the birds which accompany Spurgeon and his father on their trip to D. C. are of African descent. As an African American, Spurgeon is also of African descent. However, the birds' symbolism for Spurgeon is not supported solely by the fact that they share ties to " the Motherland [Africa]" (92).

Their symbolism is further supported by the fact that the birds' and Spurgeon's lives are similarly impacted by those ties to the Motherland.

Because the birds are “ real [African] birds” Ray Bivens Jr. believes that they will sell well at the “ Afrocentric” (92) populated Million Man March, and therefore he cages and forcefully transports them to the March. Similarly, Spurgeon attends the March only because his “ father made [him] come” (102). Had Spurgeon not been Ray Bivens Jr.’s son, and therefore not of African descent, he would not have been forced to attend the March. Z. Z. Packer furthers her use of the birds as a symbol for Spurgeon by exploiting the belief that birds engage in behavior which can be interpreted in human terms. After ordering his father out of the car, Spurgeon notes that the birds seem to be “ looking from [him] to [Ray Bivens Jr.] as though they[’ d] placed bets on who [would] go down in flames” (Packer 95). Because of the supposed similarities between humans and birds, birds are a useful tool for authors wishing to symbolize human emotions or thoughts. Mynott offers that birds are often “ distinguished partly by the different human emotions they seem to be revealing” (Mynott 282).

He references several examples of the use of human-specific traits in the description of birds, such as “ kind,” “ stern,” and “ astonished” (282). It is not such a huge leap from the attribution of such human characteristics, to “ anthropomorphic misdescription” (282). The birds in *The Ant of the Self* are said to be looking “ as though they [had] placed bets” on who would lose Spurgeon’s and his father’s confrontation. While Spurgeon is taking a stand against his father by ordering him out of the car and onto the shoulder of the road, the birds’ curious glances are exposing Spurgeon’s own thoughts. The birds, a symbol for Spurgeon, wonder whether he or his father will “ go down

in flames" (Packer 95). The caged birds, which are so capable of human expressions, are expressing Spurgeon's thoughts. ZZ Packer endows the birds with a look of human quizzicality, having them glance from the nervous Spurgeon to his angered father. Spurgeon wonders whether he or his father will win, and the birds, as his symbol, express this. As a symbol for Spurgeon and his thoughts, the birds help reveal Ray Bivens Jr.'s character as well as the nature of his relationship with Spurgeon.

Early in the story, the reader understands that Spurgeon is routinely mistreated and neglected by Ray Bivens Jr. As a young child, Spurgeon was ignored by his father while visiting him on the weekends, and says that "[I] was so bored I'd work ahead in textbooks, assign myself homework, whatever there was to do while waiting for Ray Bivens Jr. to fart himself awake [...]" (Packer 85). Because the birds function as a symbol for Spurgeon, it is significant that Ray Bivens Jr. mistreats them as well. Spurgeon himself highlights this neglect when he asks his father, "what about the birds? You didn't think to get food, did you?" (94). In keeping with his character, Ray Bivens Jr. did not remember to provide for the birds. Ray Bivens Jr. lack of concern for the birds, which function in the story as a symbol for his son, reveals that Ray Bivens Jr. is anything but a concerned or supportive father. His neglect of the birds symbolize the lifetime of inattention Spurgeon has received from his father. Ray Bivens Jr.'s lack of care for the birds is sharply contrasted by Lupita and the birds' relationship, and Spurgeon and his mother's relationship.

Since the birds symbolize Spurgeon, Lupita's treatment of them is reflective of Spurgeon's mother's treatment of her son, Spurgeon. Unlike Ray Bivens Jr. Lupita loves the squawking colorful birds, even the " Rainbow lorikeets who squirt their putrid frugiverous shit on you" (89). Although the birds, as Spurgeon points out, " technically" belong to Ray, it is Lupita who loves and cares for them (91). Similarly, even though Ray Bivens Jr. is Spurgeon's father, and is "[Spurgeon's] blood [...]," it is only Spurgeon's mother who loves and cares for him (88). Because of his parentage, Ray should care for his son, just as he should care for the birds because he is technically their owner. But as a symbol for Spurgeon, Ray's treatment of the birds' shows that he is uninterested in being a caring father. Ray Bivens Jr.'s relationship with the birds is not only neglectful, it is abusive. Since the birds function as a symbol for Spurgeon, it is expected that Ray Bivens Jr.'s relationship with Spurgeon is also violent. This expectation is correct. Ray Bivens Jr.'s abuse of the caged, defenseless birds foretells his physical abuse of his son, who is also somewhat caged and defenseless. This chain of abuse is not surprising and provides the reader with another lens through which to evaluate the two male character's relationship.

Animal abuse and child abuse are all too commonly linked. In a review of the correlation between animal and domestic abuse, researchers found that " in the majority of the families where there was evidence of physical abuse there was also animal abuse" (Becker and French 402). Of particular relevance to Ray Bivens Jr.'s role in *The Ant of the Self* is the finding that " in approximately two-thirds of the pet abusing homes, fathers were the abusers

[...]” (402). These findings only attest to Ray Bivens Jr.’s relationship with his son as an abusive one, and the role of the birds’ as a symbol for Spurgeon. During a strained conversation with his son, Ray Bivens Jr. roughly beats the noisy birds’ cages together. Later, after an exhaustive experience in a bar, Ray Bivens Jr. physically assaults his son. It is natural, both because of Becker and French’s findings and because of the birds’ role as a symbol for Spurgeon, that Ray also beats his son. The birds are a symbol for Spurgeon and receive similar treatment from Ray Bivens Jr., and therefore serve to further develop the reader’s comprehension of Spurgeon’s and his father’s relationship. The birds in their cages symbolize Spurgeon, who is trapped by his father’s parental power over him. As the birds are trapped in their cages and unable to defend themselves from Ray Bivens Jr.’s attacks, Spurgeon’s relationship with his father has trapped him and rendered him unable to avoid his father’s abuse.

Ray Bivens Jr. has locked both his son and the exotic birds inside the car and into an oppressive relationship with him. The fact that the birds were free to fly before Ray Bivens Jr. caged them reflects the loss of freedom Spurgeon experiences at the hands of his father. The reader senses that Spurgeon experiences and desires the greater freedom he enjoys when apart from his father. In fact, it was freedom from spending time with his father which drove Spurgeon to join his school’s debate team. He thought that “[he] would never have to visit Ray Bivens Jr. again” if he joined (Packer 85). Once in the possession of Ray Bivens Jr., the birds are cruelly caged and stripped of their freedom. For years, “romantic sensibilities” (Lutwack 153) have held

that keeping birds in cages is cruel. This view, which holds that depriving birds of flight is despotic, is a common theme in literature. In *The Manciple's Tale* Geoffrey Chaucer insists that even a well-cared for bird in "his cage of gold [will] be never so gay" as the bird left "in a forest, that is rude and coold" (lines 168-170). Lupita's birds, according to this viewpoint, are much happier flying freely around her home, than they are when they are crammed into cages.

ZZ Packer uses this viewpoint to establish the oppressive quality of Ray Bivens Jr.'s and Spurgeon's relationship. Lutwack explains that the oppression felt by a caged bird is "a common metaphor for any restraint placed on a person's freedom" (Lutwack 153). Ray Bivens Jr. restrains the birds' freedom, and because they symbolize Spurgeon, he also restrains his son's freedom. ZZ Packer ensures readers' awareness of the oppressive force of Ray Bivens Jr. by emphasizing the freedom that the birds and Spurgeon enjoy when away from him. The colorful birds fly freely around Lupita's home under her admiring eye, and Spurgeon is "the man of [his mother's] house" and drives her to church under the gaze of her proud eyes (Packer 95). The birds' entrapment by Ray Bivens Jr. and their symbolism of Spurgeon depict Ray Bivens Jr.'s presence as a sort of cage which Spurgeon must cast off in order to be free. The birds' symbolism reveals that Spurgeon's relationship with his father is not only oppressive and abusive, but that it is "the small, blind, crumb-seeking part" of Spurgeon which he must cast off in order to become free (101).



When Spurgeon does cast of his father, he may merely escape to the modern day equivalent of Chaucer's meager "forest, that is rude and cold," but it is "his libertee this brid [Spurgeon] desireth ay" (Geoffrey 170-174). As a bird released from its cage into a cold, foreboding forest, Spurgeon is left alone, poor, and bruised on the streets of Washington D. C. He has cast of his cage of a father, and seized the freedom which has been robbed of his symbol, the African birds. Despite his wretched state, Spurgeon is calm and able to see that the relationship he had maintained with Ray Bivens Jr. meant nothing after all (Packer 114).

As Geoffrey Chaucer maintains, the bird desires its liberty above all. Like his symbol, the birds, Spurgeon too desires his liberty above all. The colorful, squawking, African birds in *The Ant of the Self* function both as a spur for the two main characters unlikely road trip to Washington D. C. and as a symbol for the narrator of this story. The birds' connection with Ray Bivens Jr. enhances the reader's understanding of Ray Bivens Jr.'s relationship with Spurgeon. Without the birds, the story would not have been able to take off. Even more importantly, the reader would not have understood Spurgeon's and Ray Bivens Jr.'s separation as Spurgeon's escape from a cage similar to those occupied by his symbol, the birds.

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