

The use of symbolism in the novel fly away peter essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Effective use of symbolism enables the reader to gain a greater understanding of the concepts the author wishes to portray. Malouf cleverly demonstrates this within the novel *Fly Away Peter* and transforms it from a story about Australian involvement in the First World War into an analysis of society, the effect war has on people, friendship and what it is to be an Australian. On closer examination of the text Malouf's symbols become apparent, which are then able to provide further insightful information about the characters, the circumstances that are faced and the themes and messages presented to us throughout the novel.

These symbols come in various forms, although the most prominent recurring symbol within *Fly Away Peter* is that of the birds. The birds are first presented to the reader at the beginning of the novel where we find the main character Jim, bird watching in the swamplands of the Australian coast. They are described as " A vast population of water birds lived in the swamp / lorikeets, rosellas and the different families of pigeons - fruit-pigeon, bronze wings, the occasional topknot or squatter - and high over all stood the birds of prey, the hawks and kestrels. " (Pg. 1 - Chpt.) In Jim's eye, the swamplands seem to be a good representation of the world, with the different types of birds representing the different cultures and nations.

Just as in real life, we have the higher ranks of birds i. e. the hawks and kestrels, the smaller submissive pigeons and various ranks in between.

Another strong symbol within the opening chapter of the novel is that of the bi-plane, which Jim observes, flying over the swamplands. The bi-plane is a disturbance to the birds, which is described as they " scattered and flew up

in all directions. " (Pg. 3 - Chpt.) It can be said that the bi-plane is symbolic of a disturbance within society also, like the war, which appears further on in the novel. A war, like the bi-plane causes commotion among the birds/people, which results in as said, the birds flying in all directions to escape. " It was a new presence here and it made Jim Saddler feel uneasy. " (Pg. 2 - Chpt. 1)

The bi-plane creates this feeling of discomfort, as does the war. Jim also " resented its bulk, the lack of purpose in its appearance / lack of pattern in its lumbering passes, and the noise it made, which was also a disturbance and new. (Pg. 1-2 - Chpt. 1) He feels that the plane, like the war has a lack of purpose, and the ' noise' the plane makes, which is symbolic of the effects caused by the war are also a disturbance, of a kind which have not been experienced before. After learning of the war, Jim's description of the " days of the big migrations, those last days of August and early September. " (Pg. 43 - Chpt. 6) has a symbolic link to the soldiers. The migration of the birds can also be understood as the migrations of the various men and women that are leaving for Europe to fight and assist in the war.

The recurring presence of the birds, are vitally important in allowing the reader to gain a greater concept of the novel. There are however, some specific birds, which are mentioned in Fly Away Peter, which have become symbols in themselves. Upon meeting Imogen Harcourt for the first time, we find both Miss. Harcourt and Jim Saddler fixed upon the same bird, a sandpiper in the swamplands. Jim had been watching the bird with his binoculars whilst Imogen had been trying to take a photograph of it.

For some time, without either of them being aware of it, they had in all this landscape and among all its creatures been fixing their attention from different sides on the same spot and on the same small white-breasted body. " (Pg. 21 - Chpt. 3) This significance of how the two of them both being fixated on the same thing - the Sandpiper, but from different sides is symbolic of themselves in their lives. Although they are from different backgrounds they are both fixed on the same thing or goal. This goal could be the desire of understanding what life really is and its purpose.

The picture of the Sandpiper, being described as " the bird's passage through its own huddle of heat and energy had been caught for a moment and fixed, maybe for ever. " (Pg. 27-28 - Chpt. 3) Capturing this one perfect moment of the Sandpiper is symbolic of trying to capture life and fixing it " maybe for ever". Imogen later realizes that life is a cycle and must continue, but the photograph of the bird is her way of trying to keep that moment, that life alive forever. The Dunlin, which is first mentioned in chapter 7 and later again in chapter 9 is another important symbol used by Malouf.

Jim is amazed by the presence of the bird as, " It doesn't occur" (Pg. 48 - Chpt. 7), whereas Imogen sees it as quiet ordinary as she knows it as a common bird back home in Europe where she comes from. The Dunlin is appreciated differently by Jim, " and immediately on his lips it sounded different, and it wasn't just the vowel. / At its difference in his mouth and hers. " (Pg. 47 - Chpt. 7) We are given their opposing views on the Dunlin and Imogen finds " she was amazed by this new vision of him, his

determination, his intensity. " (Pg. 49 - Chpt. 7) This relates to Jim going to the war and how Miss.

Harcourt feels that he is different; his determination is similar to when he goes to war. As Jim finds the bird unique and captivating, it seems that he's enjoying something that he doesn't feel will last forever. When Jim travels to Europe to fight in the war however, Jim notices " a great flock" (Pg. 62, Chpt. 9) of Dunlins. The fact that he now sees thousands of the same bird takes away that unique and rare quality which he once felt towards them. In these conditions, we continue to find symbols, which Malouf has used to enable the reader to gain a further understanding of the story.

After Jim has been experiencing the harsh realities of the war, we find he discovers symbols representing that life is still continuing within the brutality of their current circumstances. An early sign that is discovered is when Jim notices that " even here, in the thick of fighting, there were birds" (Pg. 106 - Chpt. 14) The presence of the birds symbolizes that life continues even during times such as the war, and that the cycle of life is still able to continue. " It was comforting to see the familiar creatures / and to see they were hardly touched by the activity around them. (Pg. 62 - Chpt. 9)

Also describes the symbolism of the birds being a continuation of life within the harsh times of war. Another symbolic representation of how life was continuing is when Jim and some other soldiers are collecting wood and they discover a man digging in the soil, preparing for the winter sowing of the earth. " Something in his refusal to accept the limiting nature of conditions"

(Pg. 106, Chpt. 14) Jim describes the man, who is amazed at how life is able to continue in the depths and death caused by the war.

It provides Jim with reassurance that the cycle of life is continuing and that there still is normality within his life. In the final chapter of Fly Away Peter we are again presented with strong symbols representing the continuation of life and its cycle. We find Miss. Harcourt watching the waves and a surfer on the beach, " One after another, as they rose, gathered themselves, stood poised a moment holding the sun at their crests, then toppled. There was a rhythm to it. " (Pg. 131 - Chpt. 18) She watched the waves " build, hang and fall, one after the other in decades. (Pg. 132 - Chpt. 18)

The continuation of the waves represents the continuation of life, and how they build up and stand poised for a moment in the sun, and then topple symbolizes how things in life have their moment - their experience of life at the crest of the wave, but must eventually fall so as the cycle of life can continue. This is again described with the image of the surfer riding these waves as he is " hanging delicately balanced / Then, on the crest of the wave / went down fast into the darkening hollow, fell. " (Pg. 133 - Chpt. 8)

The surfer's brief moment on the crest of the wave represents the experience of life, and his falling into the ocean is that of how it cannot last and must eventually fall away and end, i. e. death. However, Imogen sees the surfer " paddle again, then miraculously rise / the whole performance was repeated. " (Pg. 133 - Chpt. 18) The surfer once again riding the wave, reaching the crest and having his moment again before toppling back into

the ocean symbolizes how the cycle of life goes on, it is repeated over and over again as people live out their lives - ride on the crest of the wave, but then must eventually fall into the ocean and die.

This understanding of the symbols used to represent the cycle of life allows Imogen and the reader to comprehend the death of Jim. That we are all a component of the cycle of life, and that Jim has had his time riding the crest of the wave, and now must fall into the ocean so that the cycle can be repeated. Malouf is able to effectively use symbolic representation within his novel *Fly Away Peter* to provide us with further insight into the characters, their relationships, the society in which they are positioned and the circumstances with which they must face.

They allow us to understand Jim's perception of the war and how he feels about its presence within their society. We're shown Miss Harcourt and Jim's desires to understand what life is all about. One of the most important themes of the novel is presented to the reader through symbolic suggestions, which is the concept that life is an ever-going cycle, which peaks and then must eventually fall away. The symbols throughout *Fly Away Peter* help present that central theme Malouf is trying to tell us, that " life wasn't for anything. It simply was. "