

## Seton Hall Core Texts – Literature Guide

### How to Use this Guide:

- This guide has been developed to assist Seton Hall Core instructors in approaching Core texts in ways that enable students to delve deeper into possible interpretations and develop existentially relevant readings.

**Text:** *Conference of the Birds*, or *Mantiq al-ṭayr* (literally, “Logic/Language of the Birds”) (circa late 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century CE)

- The translation to be used should be the Penguin Edition translated by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi

**Author:** Farīd ud-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1221 CE)

### About the author:

- ‘Aṭṭār was a Persian Muslim poet, Sufi (Muslim mystic), and hagiographer from Nishapur located in present-day Iran. He was a pharmacist (his namesake, ‘Aṭṭār, is an Arabic loanword for “pharmacist” in Persian) whom we are told left this work to become a Sufi master and guide. The poetry he wrote was cherished for generations to this day, and he even considered himself the *khātim al-shu‘arā’*, or Seal of the Poets (thereby paralleling Muhammad’s title, “Seal of the Prophets”). He died at the hands of the Mongol’s destructive invasion in April 1221.

### About the book:

- ‘Aṭṭār’s *Mantiq al-ṭayr* relates the story of thirty birds being led by the Hoopoe to the peak of Mount Qāf to meet their King, the Beloved. It is not the first Islamic text the topic of which is explained in bird symbolism; Ibn Sīnā, (d. 1037), Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 1123), Suhrawardī (d. 1191), Khāqānī (d. 1199), and Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209), among others, all used bird symbolism to explicate the intellectual and spiritual search for and to God. The poem is in the form of a *masnavī*, a didactic poem of continuous rhyming couplets of 10 or 11 syllables (aa bb cc, etc.). The book is, in poetic form, the explication of the spiritual quest for union with the Beloved that exemplifies Islamic love mysticism. Various mystical states and stations are encountered along the way, along with various vignettes that teach ethical,

spiritual, and intellectual lessons, until the birds reach the antepenultimate, penultimate, and ultimate mystical states, viz., union, bewilderment, and annihilation, before subsiding in/with God (*baqā' bi-Llah*) in the unmentioned station at the very end.

**Key Topics for Lecture and Discussion:** The theme of this book is one of journeying in the mystical path (*tarīqa*).

- **Topic #1 – Upward, Inward, and Outward Journey**
  - The birds are traveling to encounter their King. The birds offer various excuses for not commencing the journey; each time, the Hoopoe gives a lesson to help them overcome their anxiety. They also encounter various obstacles. The journey upward is to encounter their King; the journey inward is toward self-realization or self-knowledge (along the lines of “She who knows herself knows her Lord”); the journey outward is the encounter and interaction with fellow wayfarers and embodied beloveds of this world (according to Islamic poetics of metaphor and mystical theology, these phenomenal, embodied beloveds both *are and are not* the Divine Beloved; that is what makes them metaphors, but very *real* ones [not fake, false, or fanciful]).
  
- **Topic #2 – Loving Surrender (Conversion)**
  - Loving surrender is typically translated as the idea of absolute obedience to your shaykh (your Sufi guide) and ultimately to God. The lessons from various vignettes suggest—through often shocking plot twists—that loving surrender to God supersedes orthodoxy and orthopraxy and that love is, as it were, beyond faith and infidelity. This love is called *‘ishq*, or “passionate love”, in Islamic love mysticism. It is often a love that suffers; in other words, this love is always attendant with suffering. Following the parenthetical note above, the love experienced in this embodied world both is and is not the love humans have for God and God for humans. It is a metaphor in the rich, thick sense, not in the pretend or fake sense. In way, this embodied love is the only way we can experience Divine Love. The most famous vignette in the book is *The Story of Shaykh Sam’an*.
  
- **Topic #3 – Fears and Anxieties Preventing the Journey**

- There are two major sections that elaborate typical excuses, obstacles, and vices that prohibit the birds (wayfarers) from beginning or continuing on the journey. Each time, ‘Aṭṭār offers a lesson to encourage them on or a spiritual virtue to assist them. The first part of the book discusses 10 birds and their accompanying excuses (vices), impediments, advice, and stories to encourage them. (see Table 1). Throughout the didactic poem, there are various obstacles and fears of the journey that are then attached to a corresponding spiritual virtue or attitude to overcome them; the stories or vignettes elaborate on them (see Table 2).
  
- **Topic #4 – The Seven Valleys of the Journey/Path**
  - At the end, the birds traverse the Seven Valleys of the Way. Each valley represents one of the major mystical stations in Sufism. While the final valley is the valley of annihilation, there is an additional station that is not a valley: subsistence or remaining in/with God. Each valley is a heading in the Penguin Edition; how they are translated in the Penguin Edition are in ( ):Valley of Seeking (Quest), Passionate Love (Love), Recognition/Knowledge (Insight into Mystery), Self-Sufficiency (Detachment), *Tawhīd* (Unity), Bewilderment (Bewilderment), Poverty & Annihilation (Poverty and Nothingness). The unmentioned final and perduring station is *baqā’*, subsistence (in/with God).

### Discussion Questions

#### Page Numbers are of Penguin’s Original and Revised Edition

As you read through the story, keep all the questions in mind and *take some brief notes* so as to facilitate discussion. Keep in mind that this is a didactic poem meant to wake the reader up to his/her own spiritual inadequacies so that he/she may reach the ultimate mystical goal.

1. As you read through pages 26-56 (original)/ pp. 39-61, make a list of a) each of the birds, b) their attachment/ vice, c) and why and how that particular attachment/ vice impedes the bird (the human person) from finding spiritual realization.
  
2. The story of *Ayaz’s Sickness* is a brilliant allegory of the spiritual journey as it relates to the various religious revelations. Attempt to decipher what/ who *Ayaz*, the Messenger, and the King represent (p. 58ff original, 65ff revised)
  
3. We shall, of course, discuss the long story of *Shaykh Sam’ān*, so read that one particularly carefully (p. 62ff (original), 68ff (revised))
  
4. In pages 87-95 original/ 87-93 revised—from *The Birds are Frightened by the Emptiness of the Way...* up to and including *The Story of King Mahmoud and the woodcutter*--how do you

understand ‘Aṭṭār’s resolution to the dichotomy of prayer and striving, providence and freedom. Is it sufficient? How might this be performed in daily living?

5. Between pages 95-147 original 93-137, from *A Cowardly Bird Protests to The Bat Who Wanted to See the Sun*), what are a) some of the birds’ obstacles and fears, b) the corresponding spiritual virtue or conversion necessary to overcome them? Come up with two or three pairs (there are at least nine pairs). Use the accompanying stories interspersed throughout this section to help you out.

6. Choose one of the stories between pages 152-199 original / 141-180 revised—*A Bird Questions the hoopoe about Purity* up to and including *The Man Who wanted a Prayer-Mat*) and be prepared to explain how it reveals the proper inward, spiritual disposition (a spiritual virtue as opposed to a virtue explicitly related to human interactions).

7. *The Valleys of the Way* (200-260 original / 180-229): Choose a story from each valley and attempt to decipher how the story unfolds the meaning of the valley in which it is found. Additionally, what is significant about the order of the last three valleys? (What is the order? Keep track)

8. The rest, including and especially *The Birds Discover the Simorgh*, p. 260ff original/229ff revised: What is the surprise ending and what does it say about the mystical path?

**Recommended Resources (especially videos, clips, etc.)**

- The *Conference of the Birds* animation
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5n9RgkM-sZQ>
- “Reading the Conference of the Birds,” by James Morris
  - <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4024>
- For instructor’s reference, Chapters 6 and 7 in *Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*

The stories are the titles given in the Penguin edition of the book. You can easily find the stories and the bird’s excuses using the headers provided in the translation.

**Table 1**

<b>Bird</b>	<b>Vice</b>	<b>Impediment</b>	<b>Advice</b>	<b>Story</b>
<b>Nightingale</b>	Love of the rose (worldly love)	Satisfied with worldly desire	Love of outward, superficial; transient	<i>Dervish in love with the princess</i>
<b>Parrot</b>	Desires Freedom and immortality	Slave to immortality (false freedom)	Love, and renounce your soul	<i>Khezr – seeks immortality;</i>

				<i>sufi – seeks deth</i>
<b>Peacock</b>	Desires paradise	Seeks abode rather than master	Seek the master rather than the abode	<i>Adam—renounce paradise for the Lord</i>
<b>Duck</b>	Purity, ritual follower	Disproportionate focus on purity prevents spiritual journey	Inward and outward, unseen and seen world—both require purity	<i>None</i>
<b>Partridge</b>	Desires jewels	Loss of jewels, pearls	Your jewels are just stones to the wise	<i>King Solomon and his ring</i>
<b>Homa</b>	Self-importance, attached to duty	Better than the simorgh!	Kings pass, too...	<i>King Mahmoud after death – kingship afflicts</i>
<b>Hawk</b>	Seeks company of elite, important	Seeking worldly powers	Earthly kings commit crimes, not just righteous	<i>A king and his slave—just being used</i>
<b>Heron</b>	Desire for something he cannot have	Mourns, wallows in misery	The sea is subject to the Simorgh	<i>A hermit questions the ocean</i>
<b>Owl</b>	Desire for gold, buried ruins	Material riches	You guard night and day you treasures	<i>The miser who became a mouse</i>
<b>Finch</b>	Unworthiness, self-deprecation	False humility, ostentation	Hypocrite!	<i>Jacob's dream when Joseph was lost</i>

As above, the stories are headers in the book.

**Table 2**

**Obstacles, Fears, and Stories**

<b>Obstacles/Fears/Complaints</b>	<b>Corresponding Spiritual Virtue</b>	<b>Stories</b>
“too weak” – cowardice	Suffering the quest of love, better than a life of grief	<i>Sheikh Noughani at Neishapour A story about Rabe’eh A troubled fool</i>
“how can the wicked ever reach our goal?” – sinfulness	Repentance; seek mercy – repeatedly	<i>Gabriel and the Unbeliever A Sufi wanted to buy something for nothing God remonstrates with Moses</i>

		<i>A sinner enters heaven</i> <i>The angels' jealousy of man</i>
"caught between 'no, it isn't' and 'yes, it is'" - fickleness	No one is single-minded—sincere devotion is required	<i>A story about Shebli</i> <i>Two Sufis go to court</i> <i>A pauper in love with the king of Egypt</i>
The self ( <i>nafs ammara</i> )	The self is false: [the self commanding to evil, the false self, the ego self]	<i>A gravedigger</i> <i>Abbaseh's description of the Self</i> <i>A king questions a sufi</i> <i>Two foxes</i>
Pride	Don't attribute accomplishment to the self	<i>The devil complains</i> <i>Malek Dinar</i> <i>A rich lord and a dervish</i> <i>Death-bed repentance</i>
Miserlines	Renunciation; it is all void	<i>The novice who had some gold</i> <i>Rabe'eh and the two grains of silver</i> <i>The hermit who listened to a bird</i>
Attachment to a worldly paradise	This world perishes; the real paradise is the heart	<i>A king who built a splendid palace</i> <i>A merchant gives a party</i> <i>The spider</i> <i>The restless fool and the dervish</i> <i>Seeing the world</i>
Attachment to earthly beloved	This love is greed, love of appearances	<i>Shebli and a man whose friend had died</i> <i>A merchant who sold his favorite slave</i> <i>A king and his greyhound</i> <i>The martyrdom of Hallaj</i>
Fear of death	Big deal; we all die	<i>The phoenix</i> <i>A mourning son</i> <i>A vice-roy at the point of death</i> <i>Jesus and the stream</i> <i>The death of Socrates</i>
Bad luck	To think you alone suffer bad luck, that is arrogance!	<i>The man who refused to drink</i> <i>A king who gave his slave an apple</i> <i>A woman who wished to pray for happiness</i>

		<i>A bat who wanted to see the sun</i>
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