The Phoenix

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER

Sylvia Townsend Warner was born on December 6th, 1893, to a middle-class family in Harrow-on-the-Hill, England. Though her father was a teacher at the all-boys Harrow School, Warner was homeschooled in her childhood. A gifted musician, Warner started her career as a musicologist, but later became a novelist after moving to London and befriending writers who would later become part of the Bloomsbury set. Her first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, was published in 1926. In Dorset, Warner met her partner of forty years, the female poet Valentine Ackland. The two women became committed members of the Communist Party, and in 1937, they travelled together to Spain during the Civil War to try to stop the spread of Fascism. Warner's novels, poetry, and short stories explore themes of feminism, socialism, and homosexuality. After Ackland died of cancer in 1969, Warner remained alone until her own death—of old age—in 1978.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Warner was not shy about her left-wing political beliefs. Just a few years before "The Phoenix" was published in 1940, she and her partner Valentine Ackland travelled to Spain to aid the communists in their fight against Francisco Franco's Fascist regime. The violence of two world wars and the legacy of British imperialism also informed her writing. The destruction caused by World War I led to many anti-capitalist and socialist movements, not just the Russian Revolution of 1917. In Germany, the Spartacist uprising of 1919 was led by the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, while Béla Kun led a socialist uprising in Hungary that same year. A global Great Depression shortly followed the end of the first World War, which gave the working-class further cause to turn to socialism and Marxism. The end of World War I also coincided with the demands for independence of many former British colonies, including India and Britain's close neighbor, Ireland. In the decades following World War II, the British empire did collapse, although socialism failed to take root in western Europe.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Warner explores many of the same themes of greed and exploitation in her novel *Summer Will Show* (1936), which more explicitly draws on her Marxist leanings (the novel ends with the main character reading *The Communist Manifesto* during the French Revolution of 1848). Marxist treatises themselves were direct influences on the story, with *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and Rosa Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution?* (1901) standing out in particular. Warner's story also borrows from a tradition of short fables meant to share a moral lesson, connecting her with Aesop. "The Phoenix" might also be compared to the work of her fellow leftist and Spanish Civil War compatriot George Orwell, who also wrote about British imperialism in "Shooting an Elephant" (1936).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Phoenix
- **When Published:** 1940
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Allegorical Fable
- **Setting:** Midcentury England
- **Climax:** The phoenix lights itself on fire, setting everyone around it ablaze
- **Antagonist:** Mr. Poldero
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Fantasy Fanatic. "The Phoenix" is not Sylvia Townsend Warner's only story that uses elements of fantasy. Her first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), follows a woman who turns to witchcraft and practices magic. Her last collection of short stories, *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977), follows the goings-on of a series of fairy courts throughout Europe.

Rebellious Student. Sylvia Townsend Warner was undoubtedly a gifted student. However, her time at the local kindergarten was cut short when she was kicked out of school for mimicking her teachers.

PLOT SUMMARY

Lord Strawberry, a British aristocrat who collects birds, owns the grandest aviary in Europe. His only missing specimen is a phoenix, so he travels to Arabia in search of the rare bird. There, he finds a phoenix, gains its trust, captures it, and brings it back to England, where it becomes a public sensation. When all the buzz dies down, however, the phoenix can finally live comfortably in Lord Strawberry's aviary—it's a friendly and charming bird who loves Lord Strawberry.

Lord Strawberry eventually dies, and the phoenix is sold at auction to Mr. Tancred Poldero. Mr. Poldero runs "Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld" and he buys the bird with the hope that

the legendary animal will boost his ticket sales. Business is good for a while, but eventually the crowds start to dwindle and the cost of taking care of the phoenix outweighs its profits. After realizing that phoenix is a creature that, upon its death, will light itself on fire and be reborn, Mr. Poldero decides that he must do whatever he can to get the phoenix to burst into **flames** so that he can sell tickets to the event.

Mr. Poldero's attempts to prematurely age the bird initially prove futile. He restricts the bird's food, cuts off the bird's heat, forces it to share a cage with less friendly birds, and sets cats after the bird. Yet each time, the bird triumphs, adapting to less food and heat, winning over the unfriendly birds, and flying out of reach of the cats. Finally, Mr. Poldero consults a book about the phoenix's habitat, which he discovers is dry. So Mr. Poldero attaches a sprinkler to the bird's cage and begins tormenting the bird himself.

The phoenix grows sickly and, recognizing that the phoenix is about to die, Mr. Poldero starts advertising the once-in-a-lifetime event of witnessing the bird's death. He sells tickets to a newly intrigued audience and hires a film crew to capture the event on camera.

On the night of the phoenix's death, there is a camera crew at the ready, a packed audience, and a pyre ready in the bird's cage. But the phoenix does not simply catch on fire; its flames shoot past its cage and scorch Mr. Poldero and his audience, killing "some thousand" people.

CHARACTERS

Mr. Tancred Poldero – The antagonist of the story, Mr. Poldero is a greedy showman who owns "Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld." A cruel, arrogant, and foolhardy man, he buys the phoenix at an auction, thinking that its exoticism will draw crowds. But when the bird isn't bringing in enough ticket sales, Mr. Poldero decides to torture the phoenix in order to prematurely age it, since its death—in which it will burst into **flames**—is likely to be a popular spectacle. When he finally succeeds at getting the phoenix to age, Poldero sells many tickets (plus the film rights) to the bird's fiery death. However, he gets his comeuppance when the flames of the phoenix kill him. His greed and arrogance result in his own death, serving as a warning to readers to not follow this path.

The Phoenix – While phoenixes are mythical birds, the phoenix in this story is treated as a real (albeit exceptionally rare) creature. In the story, the phoenix was living in "Arabia" prior to its capture by Lord Strawberry, a British aristocrat and explorer. Lord Strawberry brings the bird to his aviary in England, where the phoenix thrives. But after Strawberry's death, the cruel Mr. Poldero buys the phoenix as an attraction at "Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld." Due to its quiet dignity and unfashionable beauty, the phoenix fails to attract crowds, leading Poldero to torture the phoenix in order to hasten its death. (Phoenixes die by bursting into **flames** and then they are reborn from the ashes, a spectacle from which Poldero assumes he can profit.) Despite all its hardships, the Phoenix remains a "charming" and "affable" creature throughout the story, seeming relatively unphased by all of Poldero's antics. In the end, however, the phoenix does light itself on fire in front of the crowd Poldero has assembled, but the flames shoot everywhere and cannot be controlled. Poldero and his audience burn to death, while the phoenix is presumably reborn.

Lord Strawberry – Lord Strawberry is an English nobleman and collector of rare birds, which he keeps in his private aviary. His aviary is spacious and he cares for his birds quite well. In general, Lord Strawberry is described as a benevolent and compassionate lover of nature and birds, a goodhearted man who dies penniless because he spends all of his considerable wealth giving his birds a good life. Nonetheless, Lord Strawberry is also a representation of British imperialism. As an explorer and collector, he travels to "Arabia" to capture a rare phoenix, which he brings back to Britain. While he's good to the phoenix, he treats the bird as though it were his to claim, and he has no qualms about removing a rare treasure from the place where it lives. Furthermore, his actions set the phoenix up for exploitation: while Lord Strawberry's own motives may have been relatively benevolent, after his death, the phoenix is sold to Mr. Poldero who tortures and abuses the bird. The phoenix would never have had to endure this had Lord Strawberry left the bird in its natural habitat.

THEMES

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GREED, EXPLOITATION, AND CAPITALISM

Sylvia Townsend Warner's "The Phoenix" tells the story of a greedy carnival showman, Mr. Tancred Poldero, who acquires a phoenix. Seeking to maximize his profits from the bird, Poldero attempts to exploit the fact that when a phoenix dies, it bursts into **flames** and is then reborn in the fire, turning this death and rebirth into a show. To pull it off, Poldero tortures the bird so it will die as soon as possible. This plan works, and when the bird's death seems imminent, Poldero sells the film rights plus hundreds of tickets. But when the phoenix finally bursts into flames, Mr. Poldero and his audience die in the blaze. The story, then, suggests that greed

and exploitation are destructive not merely for those being exploited, but for everyone involved. And the story, which might be described as an anti-capitalist allegory, pushes beyond just that point. It suggests that Poldero's actions are in fact motivated by the logic of capitalism, implying that capitalism will lead to its own destruction.

The story focuses on economic concerns, making it immediately clear that Poldero buys the phoenix for the sake of profit. This is most obvious in the contrast between Poldero and Lord Strawberry. Lord Strawberry, who first brings the phoenix to England, does not seek to profit from the bird. While the phoenix causes the "greatest stir among ornithologists, journalists, poets, and milliners, and [is] constantly visited," Lord Strawberry never attempts to profit from the bird's popularity. He doesn't even sell its feathers to the interested milliners (hat makers). When Lord Strawberry dies, he dies penniless, largely because of the exorbitant cost of bird feed. By contrast, Poldero buys the bird for his "Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld" show with the express purpose of monetizing the phoenix's popularity by charging people to come see it.

When public interest in the phoenix diminishes, the story's capitalist allegory turns darker. Desperate to turn a profit, Mr. Poldero resorts to violent exploitation: torturing the bird in order to hasten its death, a fiery spectacle to which Poldero knows he can sell tickets. While he slowly tortures the phoenix, Poldero aggressively promotes the event, sells tickets, and even gets a crew to film the burning of the phoenix. It is clear that Poldero sees no value in the bird's life itself—he sees it as a "resource" to be exploited no matter the cost or violence involved. Meanwhile, his *success* in selling tickets to the event suggests that other members of a capitalist society also have no qualms about witnessing such exploitation—in fact, they seem to enjoy it. Finally, at one moment, the crew Poldero has hired to film the phoenix's flames thinks the bird may not erupt, but they decide that even if the bird doesn't erupt in flames, they'll be able to sell their footage as educational content. In this way, the story makes it evident that while Poldero may be the most openly vicious capitalist in the story, he is just a part of a larger capitalist system focused above all on making a profit.

Yet when the phoenix does die, the resulting fire also kills both Poldero and his audience, suggesting that capitalism itself is self-destructive. At the simplest level, Poldero's death can be seen as a kind of poetic justice and a cautionary tale about individual greed: the greedy man created a fire in order to profit from it, and then he died in the flames. But the fact that the fire also kills the entire audience suggests that the moral responsibility for greed and exploitation does not just rest with Poldero; it rests also with the entire audience, the entire society and system that surrounds and motivates Poldero. It is not just greed or exploitation that the story is criticizing, but capitalism itself.

As an allegory about capitalism, "The Phoenix" warns that the exploitation inherent to capitalism will yield disastrous consequences. Just as Poldero cannot control the flames from the phoenix that he himself pushed to erupt, capitalists will not be able to control the catastrophic effects of their greed. Interestingly, however, the phoenix's blast won't actually destroy the phoenix itself; the phoenix will be reborn from the fire. This suggests a renewal of some sort. In this way, the story hints that there is a possible future that isn't dominated by the exploitative capitalist practices evident in Poldero and the audience, though the story doesn't attempt to depict what such a world would look like.

MAN VS. NATURE

While the phoenix is a mythical creature that doesn't exist in nature, the story treats it as a real living bird. In this way, the phoenix stands in for the dignity and power of nature, while Mr. Poldero—the showman who wants to exploit the bird for profit—stands in for mankind. The conflict between Mr. Poldero and the phoenix, then, can be seen as an allegory for the conflict between humanity and nature. And when Mr. Poldero's attempt to exploit the phoenix backfires, killing him and his audience, nature seems to have the last laugh. In this way, the story suggests that the power of nature must be respected. Attempting to dominate nature is perilous and can have catastrophic results.

The story presents two models of human dominion over nature, and the first is Lord Strawberry, a relatively benevolent explorer who "collected birds." In general, the story depicts Lord Strawberry as a capable steward of nature, a man who respects his birds and cares for them well. His aviary is spacious and it "suited [his birds] perfectly"; they seem to eat well and have plenty of room to fly around. As the phoenix stands in for nature, Lord Strawberry's respect for this bird is important. When he first finds the phoenix in Arabia, for instance, he doesn't simply snatch it—he "w[ins] its confidence" before bringing it home, with the result that the phoenix becomes "much attached" to him. Their relationship is harmonious until Lord Strawberry dies.

But despite his benevolence, Lord Strawberry is still dominating nature. No matter how much his aviary resembles nature, it's still an artificial environment that imprisons his birds. And Lord Strawberry came into possession of the phoenix by traveling to Arabia, capturing the bird, and bringing it back to his aviary in Britain, a self-centered and disruptive exercise of his power. After his death, the consequences of this behavior—both for him and for his birds—become clear. Controlling nature, it turns out, cost Lord Strawberry his whole fortune, and he died penniless due to the exorbitant costs of his aviary. Furthermore, while *he* might have been a benevolent steward of his birds, his death leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. Indeed, the unscrupulous Mr. Poldero buys the phoenix, only to torture and kill it for profit. This never would

have happened had Lord Strawberry left nature alone and allowed the phoenix to continue its natural life in Arabia.

In contrast to Lord Strawberry—who at least makes gestures towards respecting nature—Mr. Poldero is vicious, treating nature as though it exists for his purposes alone. Mr. Poldero's initial purchase of the phoenix is telling in its selfishness. With funds raised from schoolchildren and local naturalists, the London zoo makes a bid on the bird, hoping to keep the phoenix as a public treasure. But Poldero outbids the zoo without regard to what might be best for the phoenix or for British society—he only considers how much his show will profit from such a rare bird. And Mr. Poldero has no respect for the phoenix's dignified nature. Instead, he finds the bird insufferably boring, and apparently the public agrees. When people stop paying to see the bird, Poldero resorts to torturing it, hoping to hasten its death. Since the phoenix dies by bursting into flame and being reborn from the ashes, Poldero sees a business opportunity in monetizing this spectacle. His plan to sell tickets to the phoenix's premature death is so grotesque that it borders on parody, a horrific allegory of the human drive to exploit nature for profit no matter the cost.

But despite Poldero's confidence that he can control and monetize nature, nature overpowers him in the end. At the climax of the story, with Poldero, a camera crew, and thousands of spectators watching, the phoenix sets itself ablaze. Rather than being an entertaining spectacle, though, it's catastrophic—the **flames** are uncontrollable, and they quickly engulf everything nearby, including "some thousand" spectators and Poldero himself. Poldero's plan to profit off of the phoenix backfires spectacularly, punishing not only him, but his audience, too. This is an allegory for danger of attempting to dominate nature. While humanity may think we can control the natural world (like Lord Strawberry) or even profit from it (like Poldero), the consequences of this behavior can be devastating.

Furthermore, the implication is that nature doesn't simply punish mankind for its hubris; nature prevails. After all, the phoenix will rise up again from the ashes, whereas the rubble of Poldero's show cannot be reborn. In this light, it seems that nature will inevitably triumph over humanity, so perhaps it's wise to leave nature alone.

IMPERIALISM AND REBELLION

"The Phoenix" was published in 1940, at a time when the British empire still extended across several continents, including large parts of Africa and Asia. This was also a time when the colonies' growing demands for independence were threatening the empire's future. In this context, "The Phoenix" can be seen as a story about the consequences of imperialism: when the aristocratic Lord Strawberry travels to "Arabia" to capture a rare phoenix and bring it home to Britain, his behavior parallels Britain's extraction of valuable resources from the colonies. And when the exploited phoenix bursts into **flames**, killing its British tormentors, it parallels the inevitable uprisings in colonies that can no longer tolerate their oppression. Read with British imperialism in mind, the story's ending suggests that British imperialism will lead to violent revolution.

When Lord Strawberry captures the phoenix and brings it to England from its habitat in the Middle East, the story suggests that Strawberry is an imperialist figure. Lord Strawberry travels to "Arabia" (a geographic space that is vague, telling more about British control over large swaths of land in the Middle East than the precise home of phoenix) in order to complete his rare bird "collect[ion]." The phoenix is his final (and most prized) part of that collection. Lord Strawberry, then, can be seen as an explorer of the Middle East who assumes that the birds that live there are his for the taking. These actions run parallel to the larger goals of the British Empire. The British established colonies around the world from which they extracted valuable goods, such as minerals or lumber. Lord Strawberry taking the phoenix back to his London aviary reflects the broader movement of goods from the colonies to England. But unlike many imperialists, Lord Strawberry's intention is not to enrich himself—he's merely an explorer, albeit one who feels entitled to take what he wants from nature. Nonetheless, it's important to note that his actions do pave the way for Mr. Poldero to exploit the bird for money at his "Wizard Wonderworld" later in the story. In this way, Lord Strawberry can be compared to imperial explorers who may have been genuinely only interested in discovery, but who inadvertently opened up new regions of the world for colonial conquest.

Once in England, the phoenix captures the public's imagination, showing how "exotic" delights could shore up public support for imperialist ventures. When Lord Strawberry brings the phoenix back to England, it causes a national stir. Journalists, poets, and other members of the British public are fascinated by the rare and exotic bird, making it the talk of the town. The public fascination with the phoenix is explicitly related to its perceived exoticism. The label on the phoenix's cage at Mr. Poldero's "Wizard Wonderworld" says that the bird was "specially imported from the East" (making clear that it's rare and from far away). Later, Mr. Poldero compares the phoenix to "Cleopatra" and "wild gypsy music," and he describes the bird's love of "oriental wood, drenched in exotic perfumes." These descriptions are meant to conjure an imagined world of faraway splendor—a world both vague and stereotypical—in order to excite the general public about both the phoenix and the empire. In this way, the phoenix is similar to the curiosities shown at colonial exhibitions. These exhibitions displayed fascinating treasures from the colonies in order to stimulate the public's imagination and inspire continued support for trade and imperial rule.

But Mr. Poldero's exploitation of the phoenix parallels the true horrors of imperialism. Once public interest in the phoenix

wanes, Mr. Poldero resorts to torturing the bird, attempting to make the phoenix ignite itself so that he can make money by selling tickets to its death. Mr. Poldero wants to see the phoenix catch on fire so that it can be reborn, meaning that he sees no value in the bird itself. The phoenix is only a resource that he can use until the bird can be replaced. Mr. Poldero's despicable response to the bird, unfortunately, is exactly how the empire often sees its colonized subjects. Yet, unlike the horrors of colonialism (which are often invisible to the general public in Britain, since they happen miles away in the colonies), Mr. Poldero's exploitation of the phoenix is done *for* the public. The story then lays bare the violence that is normally masked by trade and exoticism. Disturbingly, however, Mr. Poldero's ability to plan a large spectacle around the bird's death shows the public's comfort—delight, even—in the face of these horrors.

When Mr. Poldero's exploitation goes too far and the phoenix erupts into flames that kill Poldero and his audience, the story suggests that imperialism will destroy itself. Like British imperialists, Poldero believes that he can make money off of treasures from afar, no matter how cruel his means. But when he tortures the phoenix until it goes up in flames, it's telling that things get out of hand—he does make money from it, but the flames are uncontrollable and they kill him and his whole audience, rendering his profits moot. Thus, these flames suggest how imperialism might destroy itself. By exploiting colonized people and stealing their resources, the British are perhaps inviting disaster, just as Poldero did. When oppressed people are pushed too far, perhaps they—like the phoenix—will all fight back with disastrous consequences for their tormentors. And while the deaths of Mr. Poldero and his audience suggest the eventual death of the British empire (which did, in fact, occur years after this story's publication), the flames also predict a rebirth. The phoenix rises from the ashes, just as the former colonies will rise, independent and autonomous.

POPULAR CULTURE, SPECTACLE, AND CRUELTY

Sylvia Townsend Warner's "The Phoenix" depicts a society that wants to be entertained. Mr. Tancred Poldero runs a tourist attraction called "Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld," where he uses a phoenix to help boost ticket sales. While phoenixes are actually mythical birds, the story presents them as real but exceptionally rare, so it makes sense that such a bird would draw a large audience. Nonetheless, the British public soon grows bored with the phoenix, which leads Mr. Poldero to recapture their attention by selling tickets to witness the phoenix's death. As in myth, this death entails the bird bursting into **flames** and being reborn from the ashes—but the fire gets out of hand and kills Poldero and the audience. By ending the story with such a violent spectacle, Warner draws attention to the cruelty of popular culture. Mr. Poldero relies on violence to satisfy the public's demand for constant novelty, suggesting that a society obsessed with entertainment becomes cruel itself. Furthermore, it's telling that the audience's preferred entertainment literally kills them. This suggests that midcentury British popular culture was at least spiritually destructive to consumers, if not literally so.

At first, the phoenix is popular with the public due to its novelty. This is a bird that's so rare that many believe it to be mythical. In fact, before Lord Strawberry ventures to Arabia in search of the phoenix, other bird experts dismissed the creature as a mere fable or something long since "extinct." When Lord Strawberry proves his detractors wrong, however, and is successful in finding a phoenix, the sight of the rare bird causes a media frenzy. The bird is "constantly visited" and "in the news" upon its arrival to England. Because the bird is so unusual, it sustains a stable level of public support. After Lord Strawberry dies, bird enthusiasts and students create the "Strawberry Phoenix Fund." Though "their means were small," the fund shows that interest in the phoenix never ceased. When Mr. Poldero buys the phoenix, the Strawberry Phoenix Fund is able to help promote the bird, and the people who supported the fund are willing to pay Mr. Poldero's fees to see the phoenix in person. Their continued support of the bird is a testament to the truly exceptional and novel qualities of the bird.

But the novelty wears off eventually, and the public turns away from the charming, dignified phoenix, demanding more sensational entertainments. Compared to the phoenix, for example, the other animals at "Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld" are wilder and more aggressive. Audiences flock to see the "antics of the baboons, or to admire the crocodile who had eaten the woman." This shows that public tastes are inclined to more gruesome and thrilling entertainments. In contrast to these animals, the phoenix's more subdued behavior and "classical" charm is unable to draw crowds. More importantly, audiences have already seen the bird, and thus are no longer interested in visiting it again; the novelty has worn off. This suggests that even the rarest creatures can capture the popular culture for just a brief span of time before people move on to something else. The excitement towards the phoenix always ends with a steady decline, with the "visits [falling] off" at Lord Strawberry's and "business slacken[ing]" at the Wonderworld. Thus, in a news-driven popular culture (where rare birds are discovered and forgotten as other events and spectacles grab attention), public attention is inevitably fleeting. And, when juxtaposed with wilder animals, audiences ignore the calm charm of the phoenix in favor of the livelier displays of baboons.

In order to recapture the public's attention (and thereby reverse his financial decline), Mr. Poldero resorts to violence, producing a spectacle of cruelty. What the other animals reveal is that violence captures the audience's attention. The phoenix must compete, notably, with a "crocodile who had eaten [a]

woman." Unlike the phoenix, this crocodile draws crowds because of its gruesome history, which hints at the public's appetite for violence. Realizing that he needs to reignite interest in the phoenix, Poldero resolves to torment the bird, sending other birds to peck at it, "jeer[ing]" at it himself, and sprinkling it with water each night. These torments, while not themselves done for public attention, are meant to prematurely "age" the bird so that Poldero can sell tickets to its fiery death. Excited by the prospect of the phoenix bursting into flames, a public audience indeed comes in droves, "some thousand" people packing around the phoenix's enclosure for the cruel, violent spectacle. Only the most shocking event of a rare bird's destruction can capture this audience's attention. Finally, emphasizing that this event is a spectacle, Mr. Poldero hires a film crew to capture the phoenix's death on camera. With the "lights and cameras [] trained on the [bird's] cage," Mr. Poldero narrates through a loudspeaker what his audience is about to witness, giving the entire moment—especially the anticipation of violence—a cinematic quality. The medium of film, moreover, offers Mr. Poldero the chance to capitalize on the cruelty even after the phoenix's death has already taken place, allowing him to reach the widest audience possible.

The story ends, however, by punishing Mr. Poldero and the audience for their cruelty. After watching the phoenix burst into flames, Poldero and the audience also catch on fire. Warner uses the "The Phoenix" not just to showcase the excitement found in cruelty, but also to show how that excitement destroys the audience itself. The audience fails to see the beauty in the phoenix, clamoring only for novelty and violence, meaning they have become ruled by their baser, more cruel desires. While this cruelty is spiritually destructive as society neglects its moral principles, it is also unsustainable. Moving from one increasingly horrifying and cruel spectacle to another results only in greater violence and more cruelty—death piling on and on. And when the popular culture continues to up the ante, the cost, if something goes wrong, is not merely destruction, but self-destruction.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE FLAMES

When the phoenix bursts into flames at the end of the story in front of a paying audience, the fire represents the moral consequences of several types of bad behavior: capitalist greed, imperialist exploitation, and thirst for violent spectacle. Throughout the story, Mr. Poldero tries to exploit the phoenix for profit, caring only for the money he can earn from the bird and not at all for its wellbeing. By the story's end, he has tortured the bird to hasten the end of its life when it will burst into flames and be reborn from the ashes. Poldero sells tickets to this spectacle, seating an audience and a film crew so that he can maximize his profits. But in the end, the phoenix's flames are uncontrollable and they kill both Poldero and his audience. Since the phoenix burst into flames as a result of Poldero's quest for money, the inferno at the end of the story can be seen as a moral consequence for greed. Poldero tried to profit off of the phoenix through gruesome means (torturing the bird and selling tickets to its death), but his greedy actions wound up destroying him.

Likewise, the mass death at the end of the story can also be seen as a consequence for the audience's thirst for a violent spectacle. After all, each person in attendance eagerly purchased tickets to the phoenix's death, but few if any of them cared to witness the phoenix's quietly dignified life. That they're only interested in witnessing violence comes with a consequence: "some thousand" audience members die in the blaze. And this fire is also a commentary on the British Empire's incessant colonization of foreign lands, as the phoenix is only in London in the first place because Lord Strawberry traveled to "Arabia," captured the phoenix, and brought it back to Britain, mirroring the flow of rare and valuable resources from British colonies to the mainland. When the phoenix bursts into flames killing its British tormentor (Poldero), this can be seen as an analog for violent revolution of oppressed colonies once they reach a breaking point.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves: Volume 1* published in 2018.

The Phoenix Quotes

"Finally Lord Strawberry went himself to Arabia, where, after some months, he found a phoenix, won its confidence, caught it, and brought it home in perfect condition.

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Related Characters: The Phoenix, Lord Strawberry

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

The story introduces Lord Strawberry as an idealistic nobleman with an expansive bird collection. Wanting to cap off his collection with an exceedingly rare phoenix, Lord Strawberry travels to Arabia to find a phoenix and bring it back to his London aviary. The story's description of this

process is important. First, Lord Strawberry's respect for the bird is evident in his insistence on not taking the bird by force, but instead by "w[inning] its confidence." This sets Lord Strawberry up as a benevolent steward of nature. But nonetheless, he does capture a rare bird, remove it from its natural habitat, and bring it back to England to live in an aviary. Even though Lord Strawberry himself is kind to the phoenix, his arrogance in removing a bird from nature has dire consequences when, after Lord Strawberry's death, the phoenix becomes vulnerable to exploitation that it would not have faced had it been left in nature.

Furthermore, Lord Strawberry's actions here run parallel to aspects of British imperialism. Just as the British empire extracted valuable goods from the colonies and shipped them back to England to for British citizens to enjoy them or profit from them, here Lord Strawberry is removing an exceedingly rare and valuable bird from a foreign land and bringing it back to England for his own benefit. Lord Strawberry does not intend to profit from the phoenix—only to enjoy the bird himself—but he can be seen as an analogue to British explorers. While explorers themselves may have been relatively benevolent, motivated only by curiosity and discovery, their actions paved the way for the true horrors of colonial exploitation. Readers can see this in the way that Lord Strawberry's benevolent but misguided quest for the phoenix leads ultimately to the phoenix's violent exploitation.

❝ On its arrival in England it made a greatest stir among ornithologists, journalists, poets, and milliners, and was constantly visited. But it was not puffed by these attentions, and when it was no longer in the news, and the visits fell off, it showed no pique or rancour.

0011

Related Characters: Lord Strawberry, The Phoenix

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

After Lord Strawberry returns to England with the phoenix, the bird becomes a media sensation. This quotation highlights a couple different things, namely how the novelty of the phoenix brings it public attention and how good-natured the bird really is.

The arrival of the phoenix—once thought to be mythical or extinct—causes "a greatest stir" among the general public. Nobody in England has ever seen a phoenix before, so its novelty drives a frenzy of attention. Importantly, the public's passion for the phoenix has both to do with its newness and also to do with its perceived exoticism. After all, the phoenix has come from Arabia—a faraway place that most of the public has never visited but which stokes people's imagination. This might be innocent on the public's part, but the net effect is sinister: delighting in this treasure of a bird stolen from Arabia subtly builds public support for British imperialism, a system that oppressed and exploited colonies for British gain.

It's also important to note how quickly the bird's novelty wears off and the public loses interest. The public frenzy around the phoenix occupies merely a sentence in this story—quickly, it seems, they take in the phoenix and then move on to something more exciting. This paints the public as fickle and sensationalist, uninterested in the inherent worth of this rare and precious bird, but only in the spectacle of something new.

Finally, this quotation offers insight into the good nature of the phoenix. The bird seems neither bothered nor excited by all the attention it attracts, and it's not hurt when those attentions wane. This indifference to attention suggests that the bird is dignified and self-possessed, not prone to extreme emotion or excessive pride. The bird's good nature makes the public's lack of interest even more of a black eye on the collective character of the public—it seems that they don't recognize the true value of the phoenix, since good character isn't very exciting to them.

❝ It costs a great deal of money to keep up an aviary. When Lord Strawberry died he died penniless.

1110

Related Characters: The Phoenix, Lord Strawberry

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Strawberry dies "penniless" due to the enormous cost of running a good enough aviary to keep his birds happy and healthy. On the one hand, this shows Lord Strawberry's benevolence. As a British nobleman, he presumably had a great fortune at the beginning of his life. That he spent all of this money on caring for his precious birds is touching—he could have kept them in squalor, but instead, he genuinely cared for their wellbeing at great cost to himself.

But this passage also starts to reveal the darker side to Lord Strawberry's actions. Even though he was a benevolent

steward of his birds during his life, Lord Strawberry never considered what might happen to them after his death; he doesn't leave enough money to make sure they continue to be well cared for. Because of this, Lord Strawberry leaves all of his birds desperately vulnerable—including his precious phoenix, who winds up getting sold to the highest bidder, an unscrupulous showman who tortures the bird to death. So this is beginning to show that Lord Strawberry's benevolence wasn't enough to justify his capturing and keeping birds. Even if he was good to them and the birds loved living with him, his failure to provide for the birds after his death suggests that they may have been better off had they been left in nature.

The London *Times* urged in a leader that the phoenix be bought for the London Zoo, saying that a nation of bird-lovers had a moral right to own such a rarity.

1010

Related Characters: The Phoenix

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Because Lord Strawberry dies penniless, his belongings are sold at auction—including his precious birds. When the news reaches the public that the phoenix will be sold to the highest bidder, though, the newspaper objects, suggesting that the London Zoo should get the phoenix since the bird is a public treasure and should belong to the nation.

On the one hand, this can be seen as a benevolent argument; the newspaper wants the British public to have perpetual access to this bird, which implicitly acknowledges how precious a phoenix is. But despite this acknowledgement of the value of nature, the paper's position still betrays the underlying attitude that nature exists for human pleasure and that people have a right to keep other creatures captive as a public spectacle. Nonetheless, the paper's suggestion that the phoenix go to the zoo is still much better than what actually happens, which is that the phoenix is sold to Mr. Poldero, a cruel showman who tortures the bird for profit. So there's a spectrum of morality here; while the paper has good intentions, everyone who is advocating to continue to keep the phoenix captive is failing, on some level, to respect nature.

Notably, the newspaper's claim that England has a "moral right" to the bird also echoes imperialist entitlement. After all, the British Empire also believed that they had a "moral right" to the resources they stole from their colonies. It apparently does not occur to the paper's the editorial staff to consider that the bird's native country might also have a "moral right" to this treasure that was taken from them.

Even at popular prices the phoenix was not really popular. It was too quiet, too classical. So people went instead to watch the antics of the baboons, or to admire the crocodile who had eaten the woman.

0001

Related Characters: The Phoenix

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

When the phoenix goes to Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld, Poldero believes that the bird will be a hit with the public, but the reality is that his audience tires quickly of the bird. This quotation explains why this is, casting the public's taste in a bad light. The public apparently finds the bird too boring to be worthwhile. Instead of recognizing its dignity and elegance, the public finds it "too quiet" (unexciting) and "too classical" (out of fashion). Notably, they prefer the "antics" of the baboons and the gruesome backstory of the crocodile who ate a woman. This underscores that the public cannot appreciate quiet beauty—instead, they crave violent spectacle, sensationalist stories, or unruly behavior. The good natured phoenix cannot provide any of this, so the bird fails to draw any crowds. But in the end, the public's taste for violence and excitement will come back to bite them when the phoenix sets Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld ablaze.

"PANSY. Phoenix *phoenixissima formossisima arabiana*. This rare and fabulous bird is UNIQUE. The World's Old Bachelor. Has no mate and doesn't want one. When old, sets fire to itself and emerges miraculously reborn. Specially imported from the East."

0011

Related Characters: Mr. Tancred Poldero, The Phoenix

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

This is the text from the label on the phoenix's cage at Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld. A major thing to note is the emphasis on the phoenix's ties to "the East," painting the bird as an exotic spectacle, presumably to draw crowds. The Latin text in the label says "most beautiful Arabian phoenix" and—just in case the reader didn't get the point that the bird is from far away—the label then reiterates that the phoenix was "specially imported from the East." Calling the bird "rare," "fabulous," and "unique" also underscores its exoticism. Then, by drawing attention to the phoenix's idiosyncratic behaviors (its refusal to mate, its rebirth from a fiery death), the label tries to excite the audience's imagination.

By calling so much attention to the novelty and exoticism of this rare bird, the label is using a tried-and-true imperialist playbook: inspiring British citizens to feel awed by the treasures that the Empire brought back from the colonies while papering over the immorality inherent to the process. After all, as with all colonial extraction, bringing the phoenix to England involved violence (capturing the phoenix) and theft (taking it forcibly from its home).

"Suppose," continued Mr. Poldero, "we could somehow get him alight? We'd advertise it beforehand, of course, work up interest. Then we'd have a new bird, and a bird with some romance about it, a bird with a life story. We could sell a bird like that."

1001

Related Characters: Mr. Tancred Poldero (speaker), The Phoenix

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Mr. Poldero develops his plan to prematurely age the phoenix (by torturing it) so that he can sell tickets to people who want to watch the bird set itself on fire. For Mr. Poldero, the moneymaking opportunities here are twofold. First, the spectacle of the phoenix's destruction is exciting enough to draw crowds on its own. Second, once the bird has been reborn from the ashes, Poldero believes that he can entice audiences to continue visiting based on the novelty of this young creature. After all, it won't be the same phoenix that everyone had grown tired of (it'll instead be a "new bird") and, because of its fiery origin story, it will have "some romance about it." Here, Poldero explicitly connects his plan with narrative, suggesting that having a "life story" is half the battle in selling tickets. This calls back to the crocodile at Poldero's whom crowds flocked to visit simply because they'd heard it ate a woman. Similarly, Poldero assumes that if his audience knew the violent story of the phoenix setting itself ablaze and being reborn, they would pay to see it. Underlying this narrative, however, is its fabrication. Mr. Poldero wants to *unnaturally* age the bird, causing it to burst into flames too early. The "life story" that he seeks to "sell" is a sham.

It was not easy to age the phoenix. Its allowance of food was halved, and halved again, but though it grew thinner its eyes were undimmed and its plumage glossy as ever.

0101

Related Characters: Mr. Tancred Poldero, The Phoenix

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mr. Poldero sets off his plan to prematurely age the phoenix through abuse. His battle with the phoenix in this passage can be seen as an allegory for mankind's relentless exploitation of nature; Mr. Poldero stands in for mankind, treating nature with arrogance and cruelty in order to make a profit, and the phoenix represents nature, accepting that cruelty with dignity and resilience. Indeed, the story's description of the phoenix's eyes as "undimmed" and its feathers as "glossy" even as it grows thinner from starvation suggests that the phoenix will not be easy for Poldero to defeat. The bird seems to have profound inner-strength that makes it difficult to tame or defeat, which the story allegorically suggests is also true of nature.

"The phoenix," the loud-speaker continued, "is as capricious as Cleopatra, as luxurious as la du Barry, as heady as a strain of wild gypsy music. All the fantastic pomp and passion of the ancient East, its languorous magic, its subtle cruelties..."

0011

Related Characters: The Phoenix, Mr. Tancred Poldero

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the spectacle of the phoenix's destruction. In front of a large paying audience, the loud-speaker gives commentary on the phoenix to build anticipation for the event. Notably, the commentary is all meant to exoticize the phoenix, creating a fantasia of imperial luxury. "Cleopatra" and "du Barry" (the mistress of King Louis XV) both conjure images of regal splendor, while the invocations of "wild gypsy music" and "the ancient East" associate the phoenix with exotic locales. The bird, then, is made into the spectacle in part because it is foreign. The references to the "ancient East" and the heightened language of "languorous magic" and "subtle cruelties" connote an imperialistic infatuation with the bird while also shrouding the phoenix in a cloud of mystery. The similes themselves are meaningless—the phoenix has no "subtle cruelties" (if anything, the story has done its best to characterize the phoenix as "amiable" and the audience as cruel), the phoenix exhibits no "languorous magic" (its magic, unobserved at this point in the story, is not languorous but explosive). Yet, the effect of these meaningless and deceitful descriptions is to entrance the audience by painting the phoenix as an exotic and capricious spectacle.

> The cameras clicked, the lights blazed full on the cage. Rushing to the loud-speaker Mr. Poldero exclaimed:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the thrilling moment the world has breathlessly awaited. The legend of centuries is materializing before our modern eyes. The phoenix..."

0001

Related Characters: Mr. Tancred Poldero (speaker), The Phoenix

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Just before the phoenix is seemingly about to combust, the audience is entranced. The passage here characterizes the moment of the phoenix's immolation as exactly what it is: a spectacle. Here, where "cameras click" and "lights blaze," the event builds with anticipation. The ellipses at the end of the quote also help build anticipation by starting a sentence with "the phoenix" and then leaving the verb—in other words what the phoenix might *do*—unsaid. The audience is waiting for the phoenix to combust, and this wait is captured in the way that the quote's final sentence trails off.

This quote also shows how spectacles are created. The loudspeaker's commentary plus the atmosphere of cameras flashing and spotlights shining and the audience waiting on edge conjures a sense of excitement. Yet there is a disconnect between this excitement and the reality of the situation, where the whole room is simply watching a decrepit bird that may or may not die while they wait. The spectacle, in this moment, is more the atmosphere than the phoenix itself, which reflects the fact that the humanity generally treats the phoenix as somewhat irrelevant. The bird's inherent worth and amiable personality have always been considered less interesting and important than the stories and myths that people have conjured about it, just as the bird itself is less important in this moment than the atmosphere surrounding it.

> "Well, if it doesn't evaluate more than this, mark instructional."

1000

Related Characters: The Phoenix, Mr. Tancred Poldero

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is a line from the film director to whom Poldero sold the media rights to the phoenix's death. In this moment, it seems as if the phoenix may not die tonight after all, which would not only disappoint the live audience, but would also make the film that the director has already shot of the phoenix much less valuable. After all, he was there to film the bird bursting into flames, which he could presumably sell to a large audience. Without the flames—in other words, with only footage of the live, quiet bird—the film can only be salvaged for much less lucrative educational purposes. The director's concern here is solely focused on how to make the most return on his investment in filming this event, and he seems to have no regard for the fact that this is literally a life-and-death situation for the phoenix. So the film director shows that, while Mr. Poldero is despicable in his determination to exploit the phoenix for profit, he is but one small piece in a larger economic system, and all of those pieces are working together to exploit the bird, incentivized by the public's hunger for violence and excitement.

This line is ironic, of course, since the scene does "evaluate more than this" when the phoenix bursts into flames and

kills everyone present. And the story's moralistic ending, in which Poldero and the crowd are punished for their cruelty and greed, gives a new meaning to the film director's speculation that the event could be "instructional"—in fact, it's instructive morally, since it casts blame on everyone involved.

❝ The flames streamed upwards, leaped out on every side. In a minute or two everything was burned to ashes, and some thousand people, including Mr. Poldero, perished in the blaze.

1111

Related Characters: Mr. Tancred Poldero, The Phoenix

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation encompasses the final lines of the story, when the phoenix catches on fire. Yet, in a twist of fate, the flames that the phoenix produces "stream" out from beyond its cage and incinerate the entire audience, including Mr. Poldero. Of course, Mr. Poldero gets his comeuppance, having abused and tortured the phoenix for the express purpose of getting the bird to light on fire before a paying audience. Thus, through his unremitting and vicious exploitation and cruelty, he reaped what he sowed.

The moral of this ending is bigger, though, than a simple punishment for Poldero's exploitative actions. The audience, too, dies a horrific death, seeming to punish them for their insatiable desire for violence and spectacle, showing that this is not only morally impermissible, but also self-destructive. And the flames can also be seen as a punishment for British imperialism (the phoenix is, in a way, punishing the society that captured it and forcibly removed it from its home and then kept it in captivity while gawking at it and torturing it). The blaze can also be seen as the inevitable result of humanity tampering with nature—trying to control nature, in this case, leads to a catastrophe beyond anything that humanity anticipated.

Yet these flames are not wholly destructive. Rather, in purging cruelties and exploitation, the flames are rejuvenating. After the phoenix is scorched, it will return from its own ashes. The same is not true of the audience that wished to see it die.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE PHOENIX

Lord Strawberry, a British nobleman, is a bird collector with the best aviary in Europe. It's suitably big, even for eagles, and he's created all kinds of habitats within it. But the nicest part of his aviary is empty; it's reserved for a phoenix.

Warner gives the reader a sense of the phoenix's novelty before it is even introduced. She does this by describing the grandiosity of Lord Strawberry's aviary, only to reveal that its finest quarters are waiting for the phoenix, giving context as to where the phoenix fits in the bird kingdom. The reader, probably familiar with the phoenix from myth, understands now just how important it will be to the story. This opening also helps characterize Lord Strawberry as a dedicated steward of nature, but also someone who is incredibly ambitious in his pursuit of the phoenix.

While many bird experts have insisted that phoenixes are mythical or extinct, Lord Strawberry believes that they exist. Every once in a while, someone tries to sell him one, but they're always other breeds of bird dyed orange or strange hybrid creatures—never the real thing. So Lord Strawberry finally goes to Arabia himself, finds a phoenix, "w[ins] its confidence," and captures it.

Once again, Warner makes it clear that the phoenix is exceptionally rare and extremely coveted. The fraudsters who try to fool Lord Strawberry into thinking that other birds are in fact a phoenix prove that there is a market for rare birds, foreshadowing the phoenix's eventual exploitation. Moreover, Lord Strawberry's successful trip to Arabia sets up a parallel between Lord Strawberry and British imperialism. While Lord Strawberry is an idealistic explorer with no intention to profit from the phoenix, he still travels the globe to remove a rare treasure from a country that isn't his and bring it back to England for his own benefit.

Lord Strawberry returns to England with the phoenix, which is a lovely bird. It's charming, friendly, and very fond of Lord Strawberry. Immediately, the public is fascinated, but the phoenix is indifferent to both the attention and the eventual waning of attention as the public loses interest. The bird is quite content.

Though it is taken from its natural habitat, the phoenix and Lord Strawberry have a strong relationship. Lord Strawberry takes excellent care of the bird, and in return, the bird offers its affection. Warner contrasts Lord Strawberry with the general public. The public is also interested in the bird, but only because it is an exotic novelty, while Lord Strawberry appreciates the bird for its excellent character, too. Lord Strawberry's care for the bird endures, while the public eventually moves on. The public's interest in the bird, then, is shallow.

After some time, Lord Strawberry dies—but he dies penniless due to the great cost of his aviary. To settle his affairs, all the birds must be sold. The newspaper argues that the London Zoo should buy the phoenix because the public has a "moral right" to such a bird, and citizens from schoolchildren to naturalists contribute funds. But the London Zoo loses its bid; the phoenix is sold instead to Mr. Tancred Poldero, owner of "Poldero's Wizard Wonderworld."

Because Lord Strawberry's death leads to Mr. Poldero's ownership of the phoenix, Warner shows that it was foolish of Lord Strawberry to have captured the bird in the first place. While he was a capable steward when he was alive, Lord Strawberry's death is inevitable and it leaves the phoenix vulnerable to exploitation. Likewise, the costs of caring for all his birds are so staggering that he ends up "penniless." The London Zoo's failure to win the phoenix also points to the fear that, under capitalism, public goods will increasingly become private.

The phoenix adjusts well to its new environment, and Mr. Poldero is pleased at first—the bird is easygoing, and while it doesn't know any tricks, he assumes it will learn some in time. For a while, the public pays heaps of money to see the phoenix, but then interest wanes. While the bird is gorgeous and kind, it's "too quiet, too classical" for the public's taste—they prefer the "antics" of monkeys or gawking at a crocodile who ate a woman.

Warner compares the phoenix with the monkeys and the crocodile to judge the public (and Mr. Poldero) for failing to recognize the majesty of the phoenix. When the novelty of the phoenix wears off, audiences don't care at all about its enduring beauty or quiet dignity—instead, they are drawn to more raucous animals, interested in spectacle over substance. Additionally, the crocodile's appetite—having eaten a woman— reflects the audience's own appetite for violence. This detail about the crocodile also shows how cruelty has a tendency towards self-destruction; this "woman" was once presumably a gawking onlooker, snatched horribly into the jaws of death.

While complaining about the cost of bird feed one day, Mr. Polderorealizes that the phoenix is no longer earning its keep—it's been weeks since anyone paid to see it. He and a colleague brainstorm ideas and eventually take note of the label on the phoenix's cage: the phoenix dies by bursting into <**flames** and from the ashes is reborn. While the phoenix appears to be in the prime of its life, Mr. Poldero proposes that they if they could somehow get the phoenix to burst into flames soon, they could sell tickets to the event. Since phoenixes don't die until they're old, Mr. Poldero decides to "do the ageing" himself.

At this point, the phoenix costs more to care for than it earns from ticket sales, and since Poldero finds no inherent value in the bird itself (he cares only to make money off the bird), this situation is unacceptable to him. Mr. Poldero's decision to exploit and prematurely age the bird, then, is dictated by the demands of the market: if he doesn't torture the bird, he will lose money on it. It's worth noting that while Mr. Poldero's logic is monstrous, he's not solely culpable for the violence that he plans—he's responding to financial incentives that are dictated by the public's taste, so the public is also to blame.

To age the phoenix, Mr. Poldero cuts its food back severely, turns off the heat, and puts mean birds into the phoenix's cage. But the phoenix remains beautiful, dignified, and amiable. Not even alley cats bother it. Reading that the phoenix's natural habitat is dry, Poldero then puts a sprinkler above its cage, and the phoenix begins to cough. Every day, Poldero abuses and harasses the bird.

Mr. Poldero's initial failure to age the bird ostensibly suggests a triumph of nature against man. Yet when Mr. Poldero changes his strategy, he is able to degrade the bird's health. The sprinkler system seems to be aging the bird effectively, but Poldero also chooses to abuse the bird himself by yelling and poking at it. This choice implies that Mr. Poldero takes some degree of violent pleasure in the abuse. While the decision to prematurely age the bird is motivated by profit, Mr. Poldero's choice to jeer and poke at the bird is motivated by pure cruelty.

By spring, the phoenix's health has deteriorated enough for Mr. Poldero to begin an advertising campaign for its death. Once the phoenix starts nesting with straw—a sign of imminent demise—Poldero sells the film rights. He ferociously publicizes the event and raises the price of admission.

Mr. Poldero is extremely calculating in his effort to build publicity for the phoenix's death. Selling film rights, publicizing the event, and raising the price of admission speak to his business acumen and greedy instincts to raise as much money from the event as possible. The medium of film, interestingly, will allow Mr. Poldero to profit off the event even after the phoenix has already combusted—audiences around the world will be able to experience the phoenix's death anew. These decisions come together to paint Mr. Poldero as a shrewd businessman. Yet, as this gears up just as the phoenix begins to build its nest, the publicity campaign again highlights the morbid cruelty of popular culture. This is making money from the premature death of a majestic bird who has been tortured into poor health.

A large crowd gathers around the phoenix on the day of its death. A loudspeaker booms, describing the phoenix as being "as capricious as Cleopatra, as luxurious as la du Barry, as heady as a strain of wild gypsy music." The announcer says that the phoenix embodies "all the fantastic pomp and passion of the ancient East, its languorous magic, its subtle cruelties…" The cameras are flashing, trained at the bird. Everyone expects the bird to soon combust.

The loudspeaker's comparisons of the phoenix to Cleopatra and la du Barry (a royal mistress and victim of the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution) are significant: they draw attention to the spectacle of death. Both figures are as famous for their deaths as for their lives (Cleopatra's suicide by allowing a snake to bite her has been depicted countless times in art). The phoenix's death, too, is a spectacle, drawing cameras and audiences gaping at the bird's demise. The comparisons to "Cleopatra" and "wild gypsy music," as well as the references to "the ancient East," are also meant to exoticize the phoenix. This exoticism adds to the spectacle, making it feel rarer and more extravagant. But these comparisons also draw attention to the imperialist exploitation taking place. The phoenix is from "the ancient East," it's immortal (sort of), and it was captured from Arabia. Its death reflects the violence committed throughout the Middle East for the sake of the British empire.

Yet just as the "thrilling moment" of the phoenix's death is about to arrive, with the entire audience "breathless" before its cage, the phoenix "[appears] to fall asleep," nestled on its pyre. Disappointed, the film director makes a note to earmark the footage for educational purposes if the phoenix doesn't do anything else.

The phoenix unintentionally undercuts the audience's anticipation of destruction. They expect to be entertained with an explosive spectacle, but instead they watch as the phoenix apparently only lays down "to fall asleep"—hardly the destruction they were waiting for. Though the phoenix will burst into flames moments later, here Warner refuses to allow the audience to even have a moment of cruel pleasure: all they get is disappointment. Finally, the film director's order to save the footage for educational purposes shows how everyone in the society, not just Mr. Poldero, is looking to make a profit.

But at that moment, the phoenix does burst into **flames**—they shoot upward and outward in all directions. Very quickly, everything is burned to the ground. "Some thousand people" have died—including Mr. Poldero.

Mr. Poldero is seemingly able to control the phoenix. He is able to prematurely age the bird, and he is able to accurately predict the evening of its death, Yet, Mr. Poldero is unable to control the flames, which destroy everything. The flames at the end of the story, then, remind readers of the unintended consequences of rampant cruelty and exploitation. The final moment of destruction is a moment of poetic justice. The audience that wanted to see the phoenix's death (including Mr. Poldero) is killed. They are punished for their cruelty. What both Mr. Poldero and the audience desired, however, was for the phoenix to burst into flames—and they actually got what they desired. In this way, Warner suggests that cruelty and exploitation are self-destructive. Similarly, through the way that the phoenix has been connected in the story to both nature and British Imperialism, the story implies that the exploitation inherent in Britian's relationship to nature and to its colonies are similarly going to lead to disaster.

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