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English Master's Essay

Spring 2021

Birds and the Intersectionality of Class, Gender, and Environment in *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*

Rachel Fergus

There is keen interest in current scholarship on the topic of the Brontës and the natural world. Amber Pouliot argues that the Brontës and their work are relevant today in part because of “our ability to preserve and experience the material traces of their existence in the form of landscapes, buildings, and relics” (420). Shawna Ross focuses on how the beginning of the Anthropocene Era would have impacted the sisters and that “we read backward into the Brontës' works the dawn of a new era characterized by human-caused ecological destruction” (219). While deep and detailed, I believe that there is much more to be said about the Brontës and nature, specifically *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*. Unlike existing scholarship, I use an intersectional approach to look at gender, class, and environment in these novels. Both texts are about governesses coming of age, surviving trials and, in the end, finding love. These books are also connected through their use of animal imagery, specifically birds.

The appearances of birds in these novels seems at first to be unremarkable; birds are often used by authors to set outdoor scenes. However, a closer look at birds in *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* shows that they aren't just incidental aspects of the story's ecosystem. Instead, birds are used as the site of conflict between the Brontës' heroines and the upper-class men in their lives. Just as birds in these novels are tortured, destroyed and used for personal gain by upper-class men, the lower-middle-class women in these texts are seen as less than human, abused and controlled by the domestic patriarchs. While birds offer a way into the authors' critiques of class and gender roles, they are also representatives of the natural world. The upper-class men that abuse and disrespect women see birds—and all of the natural world—as something to be used or destroyed at will. For example, Mr. Bloomfield in *Agnes Grey* believes that the young sparrows on the property are nuisances so they can be destroyed. Meanwhile, other birds like pigeons are useful to men like Bloomfield because they can be used for target practice. Ultimately, while

birds show the injustices of Victorian gender roles, class expectations, and human consumption on the natural world,ⁱ birds are used by the Brontës and their titular characters to subvert these cultural norms.

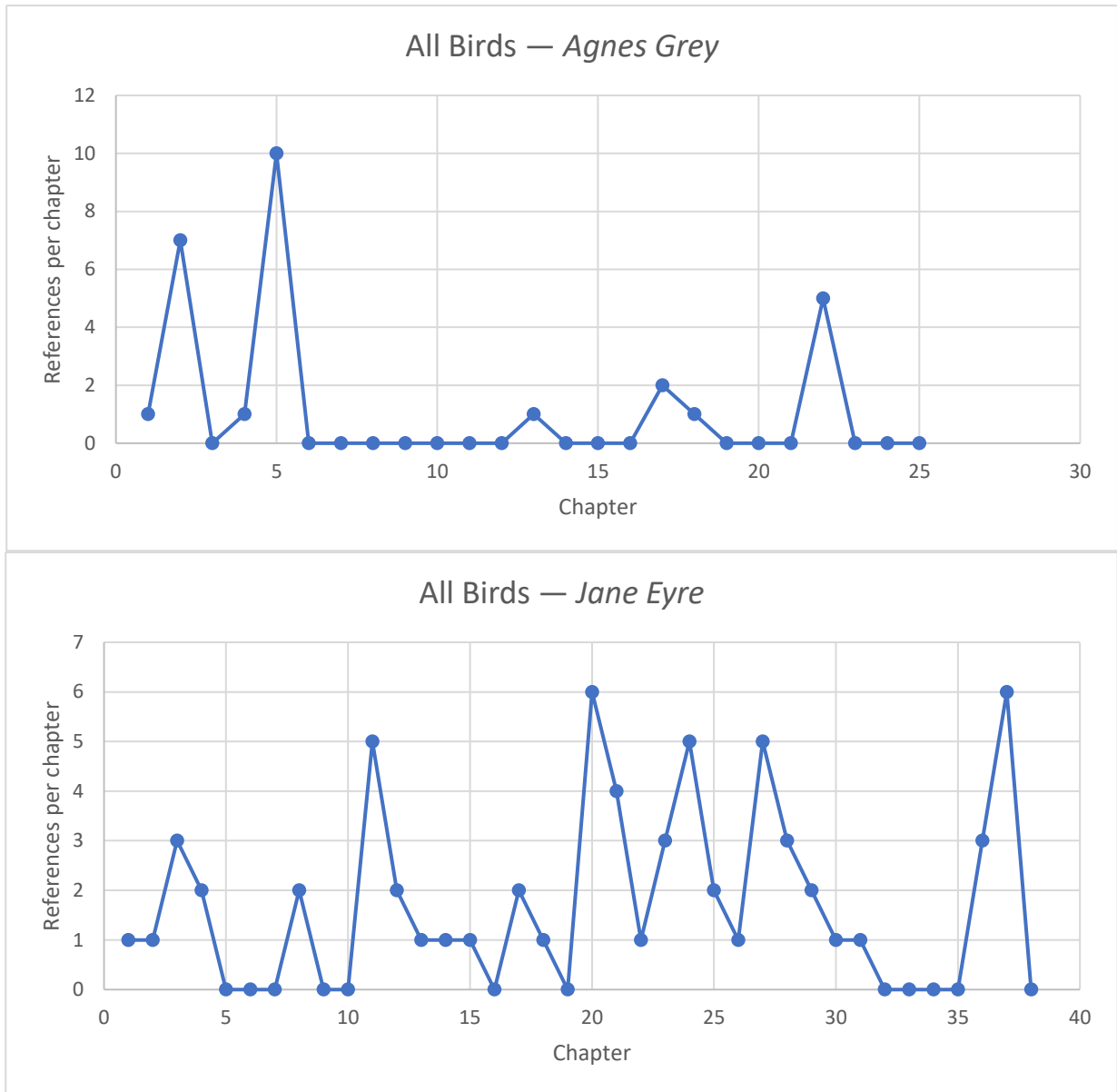
The authors do not use a phrase like “ecocriticism,” but they do convey their thoughts and observations about nature and the environmental changes that they saw happening around them. Christie Harner explains that “[a]lthough the related terms ‘ecological’ and ‘ecosystem’ did not exist in 1847, the concept was already in circulation in the early Victorian period” (579). One way the Brontës discuss this complicated topic is through birds and bird imagery. The sisters lived and wrote during what many scholars classify as the beginning of the Anthropocene era. Scholarship from 2015 explains that the Anthropoceneⁱⁱ “was first suggested to reflect the perturbation of surface Earth processes by human activities” (Zalasiewicz, Jan, et al. 204). In other words, from around the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, humans have impacted the environment. Anne and Charlotte would have seen the beginnings of human effects on the natural world. They reflect on these environmental changes in their writings by showing the impact of pollution, hunting, and fashion on birds. Fowl were and are still frequently used as sentinel species; the proverbial canaries in the coal mine. Birds that are native to an environment can show the ecosystem’s health through their population size and health (Ritter). If ecosystems near the Brontës’ home was changing due to pollution, the birds would have been an early warning of the damage being done.

Just as birds are used as sentinel species to monitor the health of the natural world, birds in *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* are used as sentinel species to show the health of lower-middle-class women; specifically, governesses. While it is important to look at class, gender, and the environment in these novels, I believe that they cannot be fully understood until we look at the

intersectional relationship between these categories. Birds are used by the Brontë sisters to show the detrimental impact upper-class men have on the environment and on middle-class women. By connecting their heroines to birds, Anne and Charlotte create characters who associate themselves with the natural world and thus ultimately free themselves from the patriarchal society's gender and class expectations. In their rebellion against the treatment of animals and, by extension, themselves, Agnes and Jane enact a kind of reform of upper-class masculinity that imaginatively constructs a vision of the future characterized by egalitarianism.

Distant Reading

Franco Moretti was the first person to coin “distant reading” (Underwood 530). Ted Underwood writes that one of the benefits of this practice “is getting at the texts themselves on a scale that can generate new perspectives” (532). Before looking at specific bird passages in *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*, it is helpful to look for patterns in the appearance of birds to begin to understand the broader view. As a first step, I categorized every bird appearance that is mentioned in the texts. In *Agnes Grey* “bird” and variations of the word (birds, birding, etc.) appears 20 times. Meanwhile in *Jane Eyre*, “bird” is written 35 times. Along with simply looking for “bird” in the novels, I also looked for specific bird types that are named by the authors. I researched birds that commonly appear in Victorian literature, birds that were native to the Brontës’ home of Haworth and then skimmed through the two texts. These three steps resulted in a list of 13 birds that appear in one or both of the novels: canary, cormorant, crow, dove, eagle, falcon, jay, owl, pigeon, robin, rook, sparrow, and wren.ⁱⁱⁱ I then charted these references on the graphs shown below:



Just by glancing at these two graphs we learn a couple of things about bird references in *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*. First, these graphs appear to show that the roles of birds in the two novels are different. In *Agnes Grey* most bird references occur in the first five chapters. In chapter five there are 10 different bird references. After that chapter, the references drop drastically; it is not until chapter 13 that we see even one more bird reference. Then, only nine appear in the remaining chapters of the book. Meanwhile, Charlotte uses birds throughout her novel at a

relatively steady pace. If the novel was divided into three sections, beginning, middle, and end, each section would have at least one chapter with more than five bird references.

Patterns in *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* have been established but I am left with questions: Why do Charlotte and Anne utilize birds in different frequencies? Beginning with *Agnes Grey*, I propose that frontloading bird references in the novel could prepare the reader for what they will read in the text. By the end of chapter five, Agnes has stepped out of her role as governess to protect birds. In doing so, she rebels against patriarchal authority that expects women and animals to be dependent upon the will of upper-class men. At the same time, Brontë critiques class and gender roles with Agnes' decision to prioritize the birds' lives over the orders of upper-class men.

The pattern of bird references in *Jane Eyre* is different than what we see in *Agnes Grey*. Bird references slowly climb before settling into a relatively steady pattern. While Anne Brontë creates a few poignant scenes with birds to introduce her readers to Agnes' rebellious persona, Charlotte uses bird references as clues to various characters' personae. This likely explains why bird references slowly grow (they increase as more characters are introduced) and then remain relatively steady throughout the remainder of the novel. By looking at the graphed bird references, it becomes clear that Brontë is associating characters with different types of birds. For example, Jane is repeatedly compared to a common free^{iv} bird, like a sparrow or a rook. Brontë is deliberate in associating characters with birds as the fowl reflect key characteristics of individuals in Jane's world. From the first pages of *Jane Eyre*, readers know that Jane is connected to simple, wild birds. Bertha Mason, meanwhile, is described as a bird of prey (243). Throughout the novel Brontë continues to remind us that like a wild bird, Jane longs and fights for freedom from patriarchal constraint.

Agnes Grey

Distant reading helps me begin to see how Anne Brontë uses birds in her novel but it cannot provide nuanced understanding of how they function in the text, so I turn to close reading. In *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë immediately emphasizes the importance of birds in her titular character's life. The night before Agnes leaves her home to begin her work with the Bloomfield family, we learn that she keeps pet pigeons. In case the reader has not picked-up on Agnes' kind heart and love for animals, Anne drops a simple reminder at the end of chapter one while Agnes is preparing to leave for her new job. She writes,

My dear friends looked so sad, and spoke so very kindly, that I could scarcely keep my eyes from overflowing: but I still affected to be gay. I had taken my last ramble with Mary on the moors, my last walk in the garden, and round the house; I had fed, with her, our pet pigeons for the last time—the pretty creatures that we had tamed to peck their food from our hands: I had given a farewell stroke to all their silky backs as they crowded in my lap. I had tenderly kissed my own peculiar favourites, the pair of snow-white fantails; I had played my last tune on the old familiar piano, and sung my last song to papa. (11)

Though Agnes' relationship with her birds offers an interesting look into her home life, Agnes' pets do not reappear in the novel. They do, however, add poignancy to the scene of her departure. Brontë shows us that Agnes' transition from her home to serving as a governess is emotionally challenging; even saying goodbye to pet pigeons is difficult for the heroine. It is interesting that Agnes keeps pigeons as they are not common pets. As we will see in *Jane Eyre*; canaries or other song birds tend to be domesticated. Pigeons meanwhile are more frequently

used for shooting practice^v. By keeping the pigeons in cages, Agnes keeps them safe from hunters—usually men—who are no longer able to shoot them for sport. Agnes’ decision to keep pigeons means that there are a few animals that hunters will never be able to possess. This act of keeping and loving something that men see as an item to be destroyed for entertainment suggests that Agnes is willing and able to subvert male dominance. Agnes is not afraid to follow her own desire, even if that means ignoring or opposing patriarchal culture.

Of course, no matter how comfortable the pigeons’ cage is, it is still a cage. In many ways Agnes also lives in a gilded prison. Agnes could live comfortably at home but a domestic life in Victorian England means that she must always be under a father’s or a husband’s care and is expected to keep their house. If a woman like Agnes does not want to stay home or is unable to remain in the home, there are very few professional options to pursue for an independent life. Hollis notes, “At the beginning of the nineteenth century, women's waged work was limited and growing less: agriculture, domestic service, textiles, needlework and governessing (45). The jobs available to women at the time were usually determined by their class. Middle-class women like Agnes could either become a governess or teacher. Leaving home, however comfortable, did not free women as they were still ensnared by the cage of class and the patriarchal control that was present in every employment situation.

The highest number of bird references in *Agnes Grey* comes after Agnes has left her home and her pets and has begun working as a governess. When Agnes arrives at the Bloomfields’ home, she quickly learns that she is no longer in a place where birds are loved and protected. The Bloomfield’s male-dominated home sees nature as an asset to be used. Agnes’ relationships with the three Bloomfield men begin in a garden where the young governess is faced with a gruesome situation: trying to control young pupils who torture birds. The revelation

of the children's horrifying habits comes when Agnes walks through the Bloomfields' grounds. The three students, Tom, Mary Anne, and Fanny, all of whom are younger than eight, have their own garden patches and bring their new governess to see them. While viewing Tom's garden, Agnes observes a mechanism made of sticks and corn. When she asks what he has built, Tom replies, "traps for birds" (17). While Tom is setting traps for literal birds, this short reply sounds like it could be a reference to Agnes' powerlessness as a governess. The reader has already received a few hints that the Bloomfields see Agnes as less than human. As the chapter plays out, it becomes clear that the birds are not the only creatures in danger of being trapped by the Bloomfields. When Tom explains what the contraptions are Agnes asks,

"Why do you catch them?"

"Papa says they do harm."

"And what do you do with them when you catch them?"

"Different things. Sometimes I give them to the cat; sometimes I cut them in pieces with my penknife; but the next, I mean to roast alive."

"And why do you mean to do such a horrible thing?"

"For two reasons: first, to see how long it will live—and then, to see what it will taste like."

"But don't you know it is extremely wicked to do such things? Remember, the birds can feel as well as you; and think, how would you like it yours?"

"Oh, that's nothing! I'm not a bird, and I can't feel what I do to them."

"But you will have to feel it some time, Tom: you have heard where wicked people go to when they die; and if you don't leave off torturing innocent birds,

remember, you will have to go there, and suffer just what you have made them suffer.”

“Oh, pooh! I shan’t. Papa knows how I treat them, and he never blames me for it: he says it is just what *he* used to do when *he* was a boy.” (17)

Though this scene involves only Agnes and Tom, the influence of Tom’s father hovers just beneath the surface of their conversation. When asked why he catches birds, Tom replies, “papa says they do harm” (17). In this simple reply, we see permission to harm birds and an acceptance of Tom’s cruel actions by the male authority figure in his life. Twice Tom stresses the word “he” in the attempt to explain to Agnes that what he is doing is acceptable because he is simply following the example set by his father. According to Tom, if he does the same thing that his father did as a child, how could his actions be wrong?

In upper-class patriarchal society, Tom’s actions are assumed to echo his father’s. When Agnes first asks Tom why he catches birds, he replies that his father says they do harm. Brontë here implies how ironic it is that Bloomfield believes birds do harm when he and his child are hunting and torturing them. It is not until Agnes again asks why he catches the birds that Tom explains that he enjoys the gruesome hobby. Earlier we learn that Bloomfield told his son that he also disfigured birds as a child (17). Brontë’s use of “also” implies that Bloomfield was reacting to an action by his son; he saw Tom killing birds and reflected that he did the same thing a child. By informing readers that Tom began this dreadful pastime before learning that his father also tortured birds as a boy, Brontë is implying that cruelty is not solely a learned trait; rather, the abuse of animals is an in-born characteristic of upper-class men.

It quickly becomes apparent that Agnes’ arguments about pain, Christian teachings, and human decency have no influence on Tom and his desire to kill birds. Why? Because he still

clings to his father's infallibility. Not only does Bloomfield know that Tom is treacherous to birds and the people around him, but he has told his son that he did the same thing when he was a boy. The father also shows his son daily that his habits of cruelty are not reserved for birds. Bloomfield is abusive towards those who depend on him for security, whether that might be his wife, the middle-class governess whom he employs, the animals that live on the family's manicured property, or the son who worships his father. Bloomfield, like other upper-class men, assumes mastery over all by imposing class and gender-based hierarchies.

If Tom is convinced that his father's torture of birds is justified, is it not logical to assume that Tom's unquestioned belief in his father's infallibility extends to other matters? If Tom assents of his father's cruel treatment of birds as an acceptable practice, then what else does Tom see his father do and understand to be the norm for upper-class men? If Bloomfield mistreats his wife and Agnes like he mistreated birds as a child, does this not suggest to his son that abusing women is acceptable? Even if Tom does not consciously comprehend these connections enabled by a patriarchal society, Brontë works to make sure that her readers pick-up on the similarities.

Tom and his father both lack empathy and mercy, due to by their patriarchal view of the world. Tom tells Agnes that capturing and killing birds isn't bad and states, "I'm not a bird, and I can't feel what I do to them" (17). To Tom, it does not matter that the birds might be capable of feeling pain as he experiences it. Invalidating other's pain and experiences is not only seen in Tom's actions, but also in apparent in how Bloomfield treats women. The "head" of the house does not frequently appear in the novel but when he does, it is as a controlling force to the women in his home. Maggie Berg argues that "through Agnes's proximity to animals, that the governess's very humanity is in question in a society which grants viable subject status only to those occupying the upper rungs of the ladder" (178). Just as Bloomfield sees birds as nuisances

and thus treats them as such, it appears that the patriarch of the family sees Agnes as something that causes harm, and thus he abuses her like he abused birds as a child. Early in Agnes' tenure with the Bloomfields, her three pupils escape from her and run outside on a cold, wet January day without the proper clothing to keep them warm and dry (29). When Agnes is unable to corral them back into the house Bloomfield scolds her for her inability to control his children and then calls out threats of physical violence until the children return to the house. Bloomfield is not done with the verbal abuse when the children return. He turns to Agnes and declares, "it's very strange, that when you've the care of 'em, you've no better control over 'em than that! — Now, there they are — gone upstairs with their nasty snowy feet! Do go after 'em and see them made decent, for Heaven's sake!" (30). Bloomfield does not care about Agnes' feelings. He yells at her in the middle of the home before going on his way. Much like the birds caught by Bloomfield and his son, Agnes is abused by the only person who has the power to protect her, for it is Bloomfield's will that determines if she keeps her job and is able to live in the house without abuse, just as it is his will to determine if the birds are tortured or not.

Uncle Robson is the third Bloomfield man who shows no compassion for birds and women. Anne says of the uncle, "manly Mr. Robson, the scorner of the female sex, was not above the foppery of stays. He seldom deigned to notice me; and, when he did, it was with a certain supercilious insolence of tone and manner that convinced me he was no gentleman" (35). Like Bloomfield, Robson finds no fault in his nephew's evil hobby. In fact, when in a "complacent mood," he goes "birds' nesting" with Agnes' pupils (36). By introducing Robson into her work, Brontë informs readers that the abhorrent activities seen in Tom and Bloomfield are reinforced throughout the patriarchy of the family. Robson, like his brother-in-law, also mistreats women. Anne's description of the uncle as "supercilious insolence" and that he was

“no gentleman” carries an undertone of sexual danger. Again we meet an abusive upper-class man. But while Tom and Bloomfield rely on words to denigrate Agnes, Robson threatens physical harm.

The cruelty of the Bloomfield men is the focus of Agnes’ story for the first few pages but it does not take long for her to rebel against the male authority of the family. Chapter five incorporates the greatest number of bird references in *Agnes Grey* and it ends with Agnes crushing a nest of baby birds. The scene begins when Tom receives five nestlings from Robson. When Tom begins contemplating what he will do with the small birds, Agnes tells him, “I shall not allow you to torture those birds. They must either be killed at once or carried back to the place you took them from, that the old birds may continue to feed them” (37). Tom replies, “But you don’t know where that is, Madam: it’s only me and uncle Robson that knows that” (37). Tom indirectly references Agnes’ class; she is respected enough to be a “madam” but does not have the wealth or connections to determine her own home. Despite Tom’s rude response to Agnes, she does not stand down, which violates the rules for governesses. When Tom refuses to tell Agnes where the birds originate, Agnes plainly states, “but if you don’t tell me, I shall kill them myself—much as I hate it” (37). Agnes steps out of the role assigned to her as a lower-middle-class woman to become an advocate for nature. Her goal is to save the birds from the Bloomfield’s theater of cruelty. Agnes would prefer that the animals be returned to their parents so they could live their lives, but when it becomes clear this will not happen, she resorts to a mercy killing. By threatening to kill the birds, Agnes lets Tom know that she will not allow him to abuse nature. Tom clearly does not like Agnes stepping into up to protect the natural world. He shouts,

“You daren’t. You daren’t touch them for your life! because you know papa and mamma, and uncle Robson, would be angry. Ha, ha! I’ve caught you there, Miss!”

“I shall do what I think right in a case of this sort without consulting any one. If your papa and mamma don’t happen to approve of it, I shall be sorry to offend them; but your uncle Robson’s opinions, of course, are nothing to me.” (37).

Tom’s ingrained belief that women should be expected to obey the men in their life is on full display. Along with barking orders to his senior, Tom’s language to address Agnes changes. While she is a “madam” before she opposes his wishes, Agnes becomes a “miss” when she decides to hold fast to her convictions. This seems to be a warning that if she continues to “disobey” Tom, her social standing could fall since he, a man, is her safety net. Even when Tom reminds Agnes that she might displease his parents, Agnes refuses to back down.

While the scene begins with a young boy planning the death of young birds, the fate of the nestlings quickly becomes a power struggle based on gender and class. In order to keep her word and to protect the helpless creatures, Agnes kills the birds. Brontë writes,

So saying—urged by a sense of duty—at the risk of both making myself sick and incurring the wrath of my employers—I got a large flat stone, that had been reared up for a mouse-trap by the gardener; then, having once more vainly endeavoured to persuade the little tyrant to let the birds be carried back, I asked what he intended to do with them. With fiendish glee he commenced a list of torments; and while he was busied in the relation, I dropped the stone upon his intended victims and crushed them flat beneath it. (37)

Up to this moment we knew that Agnes respects and cares for nature. This scene reinforces this tie as Agnes is able to forego her fear of becoming ill and being punished by the Bloomfield men

to protect the helpless creatures. After the mercy killing, when the Tom runs to Robson to complain about Agnes and ask him to kick her like kicks his dogs, Agnes shows her resolve to be a voice for nature^{vi}. When Robson promises Tom that he will find him another nest of birds, Agnes calmly replies, “(I)f you do, Mr. Robson, I shall kill them too” (37). Agnes is taking away a pleasure of control from men who believe that their power and needs should be the focus of those around them. At the same time by telling Robson that she would kill birds again, Agnes steps out of the role assigned to the lower-middle-class governesses and declares that her conviction is more important than the gender and class privilege of the Bloomfield men.

The Bloomfield men treat Agnes as less than human because they live in a society that accepts the all-encompassing power of upper-class men. But Agnes does not succumb to patriarchal expectations. *Agnes Grey* ends with Agnes living and working in a woman-run home—one that is close enough to the ocean for Agnes to take daily strolls along the shore. It is in this freedom from societal expectations that Agnes finds joy and begins to feel like a wild bird in nature. Agnes writes, “I walked along, forgetting all my cares, feeling as if I had wings to my feet, and could go at least forty miles without fatigue” (145). Just as Agnes is reflecting that she feels like a free bird, she runs into Mr. Weston, her previous love interest. Unlike the Bloomfield men, Weston does not seek to crush Agnes or the natural world. Shortly after their first meeting, Weston sees Agnes attempting to gather wildflowers. When it appears that she is struggling to do so he collects them for her. Agnes reflects, “who else would trouble himself to do so much for *me*?” (84). In the same way Weston protects animals by returning lost cats and saving small dogs from cruel rat catchers (79, 146). Interestingly, we never see Weston interact with birds. Maybe this is because Brontë does not want to associate her hero with the upper-class patriarchy that she has depicted in the Bloomfield home. Or perhaps Brontë is showing the compatibility of

Weston and Agnes as the former protects cats and dogs while the latter is the defender of birds. The novel ends with Agnes marrying a man who also disrupts social norms and, as it is implied with their meeting on the beach, Agnes lives the remainder of her life like a wild bird: close to nature and free from class and gender expectations.

Jane Eyre

Like *Agnes Grey*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* uses animals, specifically birds, to highlight and disrupt the power of upper-class men. Charlotte connects her protagonist Jane Eyre to birds on the second page of her novel. To escape her aunt and cruel cousin, Jane settles into a window seat hidden by curtains to leaf through Bewick's *History of British Birds* (10). Just as Anne slips bird references into her introductory chapter about her heroine, Charlotte emphasizes the importance of birds to young Jane through the act of looking at bird illustrations. Jane tells her readers that as a child she did not care about the book's letterpress but

there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank. They were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of "the solitary rocks and promontories" by them only inhabited; of the coast of Norway, studded with isles from its southern extremity, the Lindeness, or Naze, to the North Cape. ... Nor could I pass unnoticed the suggestion of the bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia, Spitzbergen, Nova Zembla, Iceland, Greenland, with "the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space. ... The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking. (10-11).

Bewick writes about birds from a variety of locations, but it is the birds that live in remote settings that most interest Jane. Jane isolates herself from Aunt Reed's family while reading about birds that live solitary lives. By hiding in the windowsill and reading about birds, Jane occupies a space where she is free of the inequalities dictated by her class and gender. While Anne utilizes birds to show her heroine's mercy and ecofeminist resolve, Charlotte uses birds as a symbol of freedom and transcendence.

Jane needs freedom. Like a wild bird, she does not do well when in captivity. Her life is not easy, but the moment that most terrifies her is when she is locked in her dead uncle's bedroom. Jane recounts of that long night in captivity, "[w]hat a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection! Yet in what darkness, what dense ignorance, was the mental battle fought" (19). The childhood trauma of bondage appears to have a lasting impact on Jane. For example, years later when Rochester attempts to dictate where she goes and stays she acts like a "frantic bird," one who has known captivity and refuses to return to it (293).

From an early age Jane is fascinated by birds and begins to associate the people she meets with different birds. Jane repeatedly compares Edward Rochester to crows, eagles, and falcons, all of which are large, powerful birds at the top of the food chain. Meanwhile, upper-class women are referred to as "white plummy birds," doves, lively larks, chattering wrens and caged canaries (199, 240, 204, 268). In contrast, throughout the novel Jane is associated with plain, common birds like the sea fowl she meditates on in *History of British Birds*. It makes sense that Jane is depicted as a simple bird like a rook or jay. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote that Brontë

once told her sisters that they were wrong — even morally wrong — in making their heroines beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a

heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, “I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours.” (235)

By creating a plain heroine, Brontë disrupts the societal norm of beautiful women characters in novels. This choice is also reflected in the bird imagery that Charlotte uses to describe her heroine. For example, Jane refers to herself as a stray and strange bird (282). Brontë also uses bird imagery to evoke her class status. Jane is a plain brown (like her clothing) bird while Rochester’s upper-class women friends are white and beautiful birds (199).

Jane’s association with plain birds highlights her originality, which plays an important role in her courtship with Rochester. When Jane first meets him, she shows Rochester three of her recent paintings, the first of which “represented clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse; so, too, was the foreground; or rather, the nearest billows, for there was no land. One gleam of light lifted into relief a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam” (147). This is a callback to Jane’s experience with Bewick’s book as a child. Brontë shows us that though Jane has grown and experienced more than many people have experienced at her age (especially those in the lower-middle-class), she continues to associate herself with these wild, free birds.

Even as Jane and Rochester admit their mutual attraction and become engaged, Jane holds true to her identity as a simple bird. At times Rochester does not fully understand or support Jane’s uniqueness. For example, after the couple is engaged (for the first time) Rochester, giddy with excitement and love for his bride-to-be, wants to give Jane everything: jewels, family heirlooms, and fancy gowns. But Jane rejects all of these offers. She tells her fiancé,

And then you won't know me, sir; and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin's jacket—a jay in borrowed plumes. I would as soon see you, Mr. Rochester, tricked out in stage-trappings, as myself clad in a court-lady's robe; and I don't call you handsome, sir, though I love you most dearly: far too dearly to flatter you. Don't flatter me. (299)

Despite Rochester's repetitive push to dress Jane in the fanciest clothing available, she refuses to change her clothing and the plumage with which she is associated. In this scene Brontë compares Jane the Eurasian jay (*Garrulus glandarius*), which is mostly brown and black with only a fleck of blue on the wing. In other words, Jane associates herself with a bird that is similar to a sparrow or a robin, one that is plain and common throughout Europe.

By comparing herself to a jay and accepting that likeness, Jane rejects cultural expectations for women who marry into wealth. While teaching and acting as a governess, Jane's wardrobe consisted of three dresses, which she described as a black stuff dress, "one of black silk; the best and the only additional one I had, except one of light grey, which, in my Lowood notions of the toilette, I thought too fine to be worn, except on first-rate occasions" (140). These clothes are much different from what Miss Ingram—Rochester's neighbor and rumored future wife—wears. At one social event Miss Ingram wears a pure white dress with a fringed amber scarf and a flower in her hair. Later Jane reflects that many of the women wore white while visiting Rochester, a contrast to her dull dresses (199). Jane's refusal of new dresses means that she will continue to cycle through her three simple outfits and thus ignore the expectation for women to dress in stylish clothing.

Jane's decision to hold true to her jay identity also shows that she feels free to live outside of class expectations. The reason that Jane is able to update her wardrobe is that she is

marrying a wealthy man. The three simple dresses were functional when Jane was in the lower-middle-class. As a single woman and teacher at a boarding school, Jane did not need a large selection of outfits. By continuing to wear these items Jane tells Rochester and those who see her in public that she does not feel the need to visually represent her class. This could be dangerous to a society that depends on social hierarchies to maintain upper-class control over a large population of working people. If wealthy women like Jane begin to dress like and accept lower and middle-class women, how is the rigid class structure to stand? Jane's decision would be similar to arguing that sparrows and robins are equivalent to cockatoos.

By comparing Jane to a jay, Brontë comments on gender, class and the environmental concerns of her time. Jane says that wearing a dress would be like a jay “in borrowed plumes” (299). This is a powerful image and makes us stop to think about how strange a brown bird would look with intricate feathers jammed into the simple plumage. However, this short line held much more resonance for Victorian readers than those reading the novel in the 21st century. According to Angela Serratore, the “demand for birds and their feathers reached a fever pitch” at the end of the 19th century” (Serratore). Malcolm Smith explains that at the peak, the feather trade was worth \$20 million a year, which equals about \$2.5 billion today (59). What was the use for the tens of millions of dead birds? Fashion. Smith writes that “the majority of feathers would have ended up atop vast numbers of ladies’ heads. Some would have been used to make a delicate panache or a flurry of plumes; other hats would have been decorated with a whole wing or a pair of wings” (67). Brontë does reference feathers as fashion a couple of times—with the “jay in borrowed plumes” and in her description of Rochester’s women guests as “white plummy birds” (199). This subtly shows her awareness of the use of bird feathers in the fashion industry. Smith writes, “[p]articularly valuable and sought after were the immensely attractive, lacy white

breeding nape plumed from egrets, no species of which inhabited Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (60). By comparing the women to white birds Brontë is suggesting that they participated in an industry that destroyed ecosystems and killed millions of birds. Victorian fashion was ruinous for many species. For some, it led to extinction. Nicole Johnston and Dr. Jean Parsons write that one of the species that went extinct because of fashion was the Carolina parakeet. They write that the “parakeet’s extinction came shortly after its beautiful, colorful feathers became fashionable to wear as decorations on ladies’ hats.” By refusing “borrowed plumes” Jane (consciously or not) works to subvert an industry that destroyed and depleted species around the world.

In her relationship with Rochester, Jane makes her need for autonomy clear through her art, plain clothing, and conversations. But as we see with Rochester’s desire to play dress-up with Jane, Rochester does not always respect her desires. This is also seen when Rochester first proposes. Jane thought that Rochester was marrying Miss Ingram and so she was preparing to leave Rochester and Thornfield when she told Rochester,

“I have spoken my mind, and can go anywhere now.”

“Jane, be still; don’t struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation.”

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.”

Another effort set me at liberty, and I stood erect before him. (293)

Jane reminds Rochester that she is not the “plummy,” domesticated bird that he wants her to be. As in *Agnes Grey*, Rochester is hoping to physically possess Jane just like Tom wants to possess the nestlings. In both cases, the Brontë sisters’ heroines rebuke men’s desire for control. Just as

Agnes takes control from the men who employ her when she protects the young birds, Jane takes control from her employer and future husband when she rebels and demands that Rochester respects her desires.^{vii} We have seen that all of the birds with which Jane associates are plain but there is another characteristic that connects them: they are free. While rooks and jays may be common, they are able to fly wherever they want. From the first time that we meet Jane to this moment it is clear that Brontë's titular character is working to be the sole master of her life. As a child Jane hides to be able to do what she wants and read about free birds and is happiest when she explores the woods around her school during the boarding school's typhus outbreak (10, 91). Even as an adult, seeking freedom is Jane's focus. In her relationship with Rochester, Jane ensure that he understands that while she loves him and wants to marry him, she will not give up parts of herself to comply with his desires and societal expectations for wives (293). In other words, she will not become one of his white and plummy birds. Jane is a wild bird, not a domesticated pet like other women in the novel.

Charlotte Brontë creates a protagonist who constantly subverts cultural expectations. However, Jane is not the only exception to cultural norms for middle and upper-class women in the novel. Brontë creates another character who defies the expectation of women to be beautiful pet birds: Bertha Mason. When Jane begins to learn about Bertha she refers to Rochester's first wife as "a carrion-seeking bird of prey" (243). Unlike canaries or other pretty song birds, birds of prey are not kept as pets, yet Bertha is locked in a small, windowless attic space (338). In many ways, Bertha can be viewed as Jane if Jane had been caged (literally or figuratively). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar take this resemblance a step further, writing, "Bertha has functioned as Jane's dark double throughout the governess's stay at Thornfield. Specifically, everyone of Bertha's appearances—or, more accurately, her manifestations—has been associated with an experience

(or repression) of anger on Jane's part” (360). Readers do not understand how revolutionary Jane and her need for freedom from class and gender expectations are until encountering Bertha, Brontë creates Bertha to show us what Jane would become if she is forced into captivity by patriarchal authority.

Bertha's^{viii} narrative ends with her dying in the fire that she started. Upon first reflection, this can be interpreted as a convenient way to be rid of the obstacle that keeps Jane and Rochester apart. This plot point might also be read as Brontë using the trope of killing the “evil” and impure woman to show that she has received her comeuppance. However, reading Bertha as a bird adds fresh insight into her character. Jane would act the same as Bertha if her freedom was stripped from her. When Rochester tries to physically control Jane during his proposal, Jane “struggle[ed] so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation” (293). This is how Bertha dies. In her attempt to kill her captor and destroy her cage, Bertha accidentally kills herself.

Bertha dies in the fire that she lit to gain her freedom but the fire helps the surrounding natural world and birds. Moments before Jane sees the burnt skeleton of Thornfield, we are told that she is surrounded by plain, free birds. The rookery is in good health and crows soar above Jane's head during her walk through the ruins of the hall (488-9). Flora and fauna thrive where the patriarchal stronghold once stood. Brontë writes that “amidst the drenched piles of rubbish, spring had cherished vegetation: grass and weed grew here and there between the stones and fallen rafters” (490). As nature begins to reclaim Thornfield, readers see how a woman's fight for freedom is deeply connected with the natural world. Though Bertha kills herself in the attempt to escape her cage, she succeeds in destroying the house that represented her captivity and the captivity of the surrounding natural world. With the man-made structure of Thornfield

destroyed, the natural world is able to reclaim the space that had previously been controlled by a powerful man.

Bertha also inadvertently leaves a final gift for Jane: Ferndean, an alternate home tied to nature rather than a circumscribed cage. With the destruction of Thornfield, Jane and Rochester do not have a choice but to live and raise a family in Ferndean, a home that is much more suited to Jane and her need to fly freely. Unlike the large and imposing Thornfield, which towers over the surrounding country, Ferndean is part of the landscape. When Jane first visits Ferndean she says of her journey, “[e]ven when within a very short distance of the manor-house, you could see nothing of it. ... the trees thinned a little, presently I beheld the railing, then the house—scarce, by this dim light, distinguishable from the trees; so dank and green were its decaying walls” (496-7). The destruction of Thornfield also leads to the equalization of Jane and Rochester. Throughout the novel Jane attempts to escape the snares of the patriarchal society, and as we have seen, Rochester does not always support her in her struggle for freedom. This changes when Rochester finds himself trapped in his own cage. Jane reflects on the first moment that she sees him in Ferndean. She writes, “in his countenance I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding—that reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson” (497-8). The cages that Jane and Rochester occupy in this novel are different. While Jane works to free herself from the expectations of a patriarchal society and its literal enclosures, Rochester wants to free himself from depending on others as he adjusts to his blindness and physical disability. The solitary home of Ferndean offers the couple a place where they are able to understand one another and work together to free themselves from their cages; Rochester learns to share power with Jane, and Jane finds a space to live connected

to nature that allows her to paradoxically live independently yet in a relationship with another as her authentic self.

Conclusion

Reading *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* in relation to bird imagery provides opportunity to reflect on the intersections of gender, class, and the environment in these novels. For decades scientists have looked at birds to monitor ecosystem changes because as sentinel species as they are “(h)ighly visible, mobile, and reactive to change in climate, they are among key indicators of global warming” (“Introduction” 3). Just as birds are used by scientists today to monitor pollution and habitat health, the Brontë sisters use birds to monitor the health of the natural world in Victorian England. They use birds to show how the natural world is devastated by patriarchal society. In *Agnes Grey* birds are used to show that upper-class men view the natural world as something that they can consume and exploit. *Jane Eyre* also critiques upper-class men and their destructive habits. However, where Anne shows the interaction of men with literal birds, Charlotte utilizes bird imagery along with references to the fashion industry to rebuke upper-class men.

Just as birds show how men treat the natural world, fowl are used by the authors to show society’s class and gender expectations. The Bloomfields expected governesses to submit to their will because like birds, lower-middle-class women are seen by their employers as things that are there to do their bidding. In *Agnes Grey* this is most clearly seen when Tom plans to kill the nestlings and rebukes Agnes’ request to allow them to live. Meanwhile in *Jane Eyre*, middle and upper-class women are expected to appear like beautiful and exotic birds. Upper-class men like Rochester believe that they have the right to dictate the plumage that their wives or

daughters wear. If Agnes and Jane, as governesses, can be seen as sentinel species for the health of class and gender relationships, we see them in crisis when they are oppressed by their wealthy employers. Their struggle for justice is linked to the status of birds in the natural world; Agnes becomes a voice for the birds and Jane shows the value of common bird species. As Agnes and Jane associate themselves with the natural world they subvert societal expectations for lower-middle-class women. By protecting and valuing the natural world, they rebuke upper-class men's belief that they can control both women and the natural world^{ix}.

The complex representation of birds in these two novels shows that Anne and Charlotte Brontë are proto-ecofeminist writers. It can be difficult to tease out these themes since cultural norms for Victorians and those living in the 21st century are drastically different. When looking at *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*, it is vital to place the novels in their cultural context, rather than comparing the texts to contemporary norms. It is clear today that common beliefs in Victorian England about gender, class and the environment were deeply flawed. However, we cannot hold writers like Anne and Charlotte Brontë accountable for writing about the society in which they lived. When we acknowledge the problematic beliefs common in the Victorian era as we read texts like *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*, it is clear that the sisters were revolutionary in their writings on the intersectionality of the environment, class, and gender. In turn, *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* paved the way for future thinkers to rebuke and fight against the destruction of the environment caused by male-dominated society.

Notes

1. One challenge of tracking every bird mention in *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre* is deciding which words to include in my research. I decided to only include the instances when “bird” or a name of a bird is included because the vast majority “wing” and “feather” appearances in the texts are in the same sentence as “bird.” In order to not skew my data, I decided not to track these words. I also opted not to track “chicken” as the word always referred to a meal consumed by characters rather than the bird that provided the meal (I compare it to “cow” versus “beef”).
2. Jesse Oak Taylor states of Victorians and the Anthropocene, “if the Anthropocene was invented in the late eighteenth century, then the Victorians were its first inhabitants. If the geologic agency of the human emerged alongside the idea of ‘Nature’ within Romanticism (and as part of the same historical processes), then the Victorians were the first people to dwell within it as a condition of their existence, witnessing the radical transformation of the world and of the conditions of possibility within it” (878).
3. Carolyn Miller argues that it is important and relevant to connect our studies of the environment and Victorian literature. She writes, “climate change must move into every field of academic debate and every part of the university curriculum, it is equally the case that unique aspects of nineteenth-century Britain and its Empire make our field particularly connected to the topic of climate change” (538).
4. There are a variety of definitions of “free.” When I write about Jane being a “free” bird, I do not simply mean that she exists outside of a cage. I rely on the definition of “free” from the Oxford English Dictionary, which is “not in servitude to another.” When applying this definition, birds that are used by society would not be free—birds raised for

food, kept as pets, used as target practice, and fowl used by humans for any other reason would not be truly free. In the same way, Agnes and Charlotte strive to find space where they are not in servitude to another or a system.

5. Pigeon shooting frequently appeared in newspapers in 19th century British newspapers. A January 1836 article in the *Morning Post* is titled “Sporting” and reads, “the match between Mr. George Chantry and Mr. Williamson, for 20L a-side, at twenty-one birds each, twenty-one yards from the trap, which was announced to take place yesterday, at Chalk Farm, did not come off” (3). Meanwhile in 1840, an article titled “Sporting Literature” states that a pigeon shooting was held “between two crack shots, Mr. Roger Warren Marsland of Reddish, and Mr. John Antrobus of Lancashire-hill. Each of whom have hitherto disputed the other’s superiority, whilst neither dared to give the challenge. The number of birds fixes upon was four each. ...Mr. Marsland killer three out of his four birds, whilst Mr. Antrobus, to the astonishment of all, missed every shot within the bounds” (11). These samplings show the frequency of pigeon hunting and the use of the birds for sport.
6. In her decision to kill the baby birds, Agnes shows that she is an ally of the natural world. The connection that we see between feminism and nature in *Agnes Grey* is still important today. Karen J. Warren writes, “What does it mean to say ‘nature is a feminist issue’? Minimally, something is a ‘feminist issue’ if an understanding of it helps one understand the oppression, subordination, or domination of women. Equal rights, comparable pay for comparable work, and day care centers are feminist issues because understanding them shed light on the subordination or inferior status of women cross-culturally. ... According to ecofeminists, trees, water, food production, animals, toxins and, more generally,

naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nonhuman nature) are feminist issues because understanding them helps one understand the interconnections among the dominations of women and other subordinated groups of humans... on one hand, and the domination of nonhuman nature, on the other hand.” (1-2)

7. Adrian Tait explains that like Jane, Brontë’s “‘shabby-genteel’ place in the social order was at best uncertain, but her status as a woman—specifically, as a gentlewoman—further constrained the choices that were available to her. She too was trapped ‘within a patriarchal scheme of values,’ and her struggle to assert herself is also in part Jane’s own struggle (34).
8. Bertha shows readers what would become of Jane if she was caged. She also tells the reader much more about Jane and Victorian England, specifically the ever-present colonialism. Bertha is a colonized body who was brought to England after her family married her off to an English man. Sue Thomas writes, “In the relationship between Bertha and Rochester, Brontë maps other dimensions of the colonial relation, inflected across British marriage law. Bertha is figured as a despotic mistress to her household slaves, who is herself enslaved and bestialized by her passions” (7). Alexandra Nygren complicates the character of Bertha even further. She writes of Bertha, “her mental illness and colonial subject position must be taken into account for a true reading of her plight in the attic and eventual death. By reading through a twofold lens of postcolonial feminism and disability studies, Bertha becomes a disabled female subject who is a casualty of patriarchal, colonialist, and ableist hegemony” (117). Nygren concludes her comments about Bertha by stating, “As a colonized body, brought to England by her husband, Bertha is without familial support or much power under the law. Indeed, it is only

through her brother's lawyer's timely appearance and a series of fortunate coincidences that Jane is even told about Bertha's existence. Even then, while the marriage between Rochester and Jane is stopped, nothing changes for Bertha herself.

9. While both Agnes and Charlotte rebuke upper-class men's belief that they can control both women and the natural world and get closer to being free, I argue that the protagonists have not fully realized freedom. Both novels end with the protagonists marrying and having children. These acts alone do not take away one's freedom but we see in both novels that Agnes and Charlotte take-on some roles expected of wives and mothers in Victorian England, for example teaching children and caring for the home.

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