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Flight of the Imagination

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Flight of the Imagination

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Thomas Bewick, an ornithological illustrator and nature writer, provided artistic inspiration for the imagination of the Victorian writer, Charlotte Brontë. Bewick captured the essence of nature in art and poetry. In his poem titled "Newcastle Upon Tyne," Bewick wrote:

*O Nature! How in every charm supreme;
Thy votaries feast on raptures ever new!
O for the voice and fire of seraphim
To sing thy glories with devotion due!
Blest be the day I 'scap'd the wrangling
crew,
From Pyrrho's maze, and Epicurus' sty;
And held high converse with the godlike
few,*

*Who to th'enraptur'd heart, and ear, and
eye,
Teach beauty, virtue, truth, and love, and
melody! (20)*

Bewick's book *The History of British Birds* was of such particular interest to Charlotte Brontë that she incorporated references to the book in her 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Brontë and her siblings were fascinated with this book in their youth. Perhaps the aforementioned poem is an indication of their reasons. The children used their imaginations, fueled by the artists and poets of their time, to create stories. The authors William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman note in *A Handbook to Literature* that "in the romantic mood," there is "a psychological desire to escape from unpleasant realities" (452). Author Rebecca Fraser, in her 1988 book *The Brontës: Charlotte Brontë and Her Family*, also states that "there was little to interrupt the children from the reveries induced by their reading, which provided the consolation for the unhappiness that they were so much in need of" (51). Fraser explains that, at seventeen, Brontë wrote the poem "Lines on Bewick" in which the verses illustrate her own childhood love for Bewick's book:

. . . again we turn
*With fresh delight to the enchanted page
Where pictured thoughts that breathe and*

speak and burn
Still please alike our youth and riper age
We turn the page: before the expectant
eye
A traveller stands lone on some desert
heath;
I cannot speak the rapture that I feel
When on the work of such a mind I gaze.
 (51)

Brontë interweaves her own personal experience with Romantic nature imagery; she spins this thread of imagination influenced by the art of Thomas Bewick within the context of *Jane Eyre*, and this is evident in her frequent use of bird imagery. Not only is Brontë successful in creating Romantic images as she refers to nature, but she poignantly uses birds as creatures who, when unrestrained, take freedom in flight—an important symbolism in the context of the story of *Jane Eyre*. In the 1895 article “Charlotte Brontë’s Place in Literature,” Frederic Harrison suggests the following:

Charlotte Brontë told us her own life, her own feelings, sufferings, pride, joy, and ambition. She bared for us her own inner soul, and all that it had known and desired, and this she did with a noble, pure, simple, but intense truth . . . coloured with native

imagination and a sense of true art. (4479)

At the onset of the novel, the child Jane Eyre spends countless hours immersed in her solitary world of books. Because of the emphasis that is placed on Bewick's *A History of British Birds* at the beginning of the story, the reader can ascertain that the placement of this particular book within the context of the novel by Brontë is not without purpose. Brontë places this book in the hands of her protagonist because this book has the "power to remove the unhappy child Jane Eyre from her hateful surroundings" (Fraser 51). Brontë's character is a clever and observant child who views the world around her as an artist would; she studies human nature in great detail. At the beginning of the novel, Jane spends a significant amount of time describing the scenes she is reading about in Bewick's book. As Jane notes, "each picture told a story; mysterious often to my underdeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting" (Brontë 6-7). Just as Charlotte was in her youth, Jane is deeply affected by the pictorial images she sees in Bewick's work. When writing *Jane Eyre*, Brontë used the imagery from *A History of British Birds* to symbolically delineate Jane Eyre's emotions, surroundings, perceptions, and interpersonal relationships. As the oppressed character of Jane Eyre develops in the novel, so does the use of bird imagery to describe human emotions and Jane's

surroundings. As each bird has a particular set of behaviors, so does Jane and many of the characters with whom she comes in contact. Just as Brontë viewed the artful displays in Bewick's book as a child, so too can the readers of *Jane Eyre* imagine these pictures as they see Brontë's characterizations in terms of bird imagery. By using Bewick's *A History of British Birds* within the context of the novel, Brontë provides the canvas to symbolically paint, for the reader, a profound, artistic character study that colors the entire novel.

Literary critic Felicia Gordon, in a 1989 article titled "Jane's Five Homes," notes that "it is significant that, at Gateshead, Jane effects her first escape from an oppressive reality through the medium of Romantic art, in her reading of Bewick's *British Birds*" (44). Jane delineates her own situation when she describes what she is seeing in the book: "[t]hey were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of 'the solitary rocks and promontories' by them only inhabited" (Brontë 6). She further describes the coldness she experiences when she speaks of Bewick's descriptions of "'forlorn regions of dreary space—that reservoir of frost and snow, where the firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surround the pole, and concentre the multiplied rigors of extreme cold'" (Brontë 6). Robert Keefe, discussing Jane's character in

"Death and Survival in *Jane Eyre*," explains that "throughout the novel, she will return again and again to an awed consideration of what it must be like to be dead, to be a spirit in a frozen world" (98). Although the character of *Jane Eyre* continually acknowledges her series of desperate situations, she refuses to be trapped, like a caged bird, within them. Jane keeps her eye always on the "hilly horizon" and notes that she "longed to surmount; all within their boundary of rock and heath seemed prison-ground, exile limits" (Brontë 72). In *Jane Eyre*, the reader can see evidence of the Romantic tradition, in which Brontë uses nature to describe Jane's emotions.

As a child, Jane Eyre's choices are limited; after leaving Gateshead, she remains desolate in the cold surroundings of the Lowood School. After eight years at the school, Jane takes the position as a governess for the ward of the wealthy Edward Rochester. She eventually falls in love with him, but when Jane first meets her employer, she is still looking to the horizon. The perceptive Rochester notes that he sees in her "the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage; a vivid restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high" (Brontë 118-19). Jane soon begins to characterize Rochester as a "falcon" and compares him to others as such; she notes, upon seeing the character Richard Mason, that "the contrast could not be much

greater between a sleek gander and a fierce falcon" (Brontë 162). Richard Chase, in a 1947 essay titled "The Brontës: A Centennial Observance," explains that Rochester is a "Gothical-Byronic character" and "he draws her to him with a strange fascination; yet she is repelled by his animalism and his demonism" (58). In a contrasting view, perhaps Jane is not so much repelled by Rochester's appearance as she is with his tainted past and the secret he is hiding. Jane understands that Rochester is keeping a secret at Thornfield, and this frightens her. Brontë once again uses nature and bird imagery to describe Jane's fear of the mysterious Bertha: "[w]hat creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman's face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?" (179). This image helps Brontë create, for the reader, a startling gothic picture of Jane's terror of the unknown.

Despite the knowledge that Rochester is hiding something, Jane's love for him blossoms. She begins to see him, not for his monetary wealth, but for his "wealth of the power of communicating happiness, that to taste but of the crumbs he scattered to stray and stranger birds like me was to feast genially" (Brontë 209). This moment in the novel strikes an interesting parallel to the beginning of the story when Jane is feeding birds from her windowsill. She "wanted the bird to be secure of its

bread," and she "scattered the crumbs, some on the stone sill, some on the cherry-tree bough" (Brontë 25). These moments in the novel illustrate the role of the provider in the story. As a child, Jane lacks the love and happiness she needs; she, therefore, extends her care to "a little hungry robin" (Brontë 25). Later, it is Jane who is the needy bird when Rochester supplies her with morsels of happiness. Comparing the presentation of Jane as a needy bird to the way in which Bewick describes robins provides an understanding of his work as an influence on Brontë's writing. Bewick's robin is a creature who "taps at the window with his bill, as if to entreat an asylum, which is always cheerfully granted, and with a simplicity the most delightful, hops round the house, picks up the crumbs, and seems to make himself one of the family" (131). In her 1977 essay "The Brontës," Winifred Gerin notes that "normal human relationships based on mutual trust and humanity take a disproportionate place in Jane's affection, because of the traumatic experiences of her childhood" (161). Rochester's affections for Jane grow and he is everintrigued by her curious mind. Rochester's emotions are illustrated when he explains, "[W]hen you are inquisitive, Jane, you always make me smile. You open your eyes like an eager bird" (Brontë 265). This also indicates that the level of equality within this mutually satisfying relationship is growing. Rochester has

begun to need Jane as much as she needs him.

Brontë further weaves nature into the story by not only using bird imagery within her descriptive narrative but also through her placement of birds as active participants within the story's scenery. In one conversation between Jane and Rochester, Brontë shows Jane imagining birds acting as a captive audience to her dialogue with Rochester:

He paused: the birds went on carolling, the leaves lightly rustling. I almost wondered they did not check their songs and whispers to catch the suspended revelation: but they would have to wait many minutes—so long was the silence protracted. (186-87).

The birds are silent listeners to the songs of a budding courtship.

Rochester eventually falls in love with Jane and intends to ask for her hand in marriage although he continues to let Jane believe he plans to marry Blanche Ingram, a woman who, according to Jane, moves among the aristocratic "flock of white plumy birds" (Brontë 146). Rochester teases Jane when he explains to her that he has secured a position for her in Ireland. Rochester sees Jane's discomfort and says, "Jane, be still; don't struggle so, like a wild, frantic bird that is rendering its own plumage in

its desperation" (Brontë 216). Jane responds with one of the strongest displays of her character's determination: "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" (Brontë 216). Additionally, Jane is shocked at Rochester's proposal and still believes that Blanche "stands between" them (Brontë 217). As the story unfolds, the reader finds that it is Bertha, not Blanche who is the bride that separates Jane from Rochester. When this is discovered, Jane compares the natural habitat of birds to her own behavior as she notes that "birds were faithful to their mates; birds were emblems of love" and asks herself the following question: "What was I?" (Brontë 274). Jane knows that because Rochester is still married to the insane being in his attic, she must leave him despite her painful inner struggle and temptation to stay. Jane's emotional state is weakened when she departs Thornfield, but she remains strong and steadfast in her principles. Through the use of bird imagery, Brontë continually illustrates the beauty, as well as the strain of Jane's relationship with Rochester. Lewis Gates notes, in his 1900 essay "Charlotte Brontë," that Brontë's characters are "knit by 'organic filaments' to the nature they inhabit, and they can be thoroughly and persuasively realized only as their sensitive union with this nature-world which is their home is continually suggested" (4495). He adds

that for "the romantic poet, the individual is far more closely dependent on the vast instinctive world of nature for comfort and help and even for the life of the spirit, than on the conventional world of society" (Gates 4495).

The young Charlotte Brontë looked to the Romantic images in Bewick's book for comfort in her childhood and retains their images to use in describing the life of her character Jane Eyre. Gates explains that "for Charlotte Brontë, the struggle for life is the struggle for affection" (4494). He adds that Brontë's stories always seem to contain "some creature striving for happiness," and the beginning of the story of Jane Eyre emphasizes this "tragically isolated little figure . . . symbolically busy over a woodcut of the lonely and frigid arctic regions" (Gates 4494). After Jane leaves Thornfield, she is once again cold and isolated. Jane exercised her right to freedom through her principles but at the cost of her own physical well-being. It is now up to Mary, Diana, and their brother Mr. St. John to extend help to Jane's weakened character. Mary and Diana take "pleasure in keeping and cherishing a half-frozen bird," explains St. John Rivers in the novel (Brontë 297). Once Jane's health is restored, she learns that she has inherited not only a substantial fortune, but a family as well. Unfortunately, even this situation is not without struggle. Jane must once again exert her determination, this time by refusing to marry St. John.

As the novel progresses, the reader sees the shift in the character of Jane Eyre from a weak and helpless bird to a strong being whose freedom and independence now allow her to return to Thornfield "like a messenger-pigeon flying home" to a duty of her own choosing (Brontë 360). Jane returns to Rochester and finds that he too has changed. His appearance "looked desperate and brooding . . . a caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished" (Brontë 367). It is not Jane that is the caged and helpless bird, but Rochester. Their roles have been reversed, "just as if a royal eagle, chained to a perch, should be forced to entreat a sparrow to become its purveyor" (Brontë 374). Jane is no longer the subservient being she once was and, without the boundary of Rochester's marriage to Bertha, can now fully give her heart to Rochester. Jane explains to Rochester: "I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector" (Brontë 379). Jane is not only free from her restrictive role as a dependent, but she can also feel as though she is performing her duty in life.

Charlotte Brontë paints, for the reader, a picturesque view of the struggles of one woman for freedom and happiness. Jane Eyre breaks free of the cage created by Victorian society with grace and principle. Brontë's

masterpiece illustrates a character unyielding, flying off to meet her horizon with strength and independence. Jane does marry Rochester in the end, but she does so as a woman who desires and attains happiness on her own terms.

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