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THE BRONTËS AND THE BEASTS: NEWLY  
AWAKENED SYMPATHIES AND SHIFTING  
REPRESENTATIONS OF OTHER-THAN-  
HUMAN ANIMALS IN VICTORIAN  
LITERATURE

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THE BRONTËS AND THE BEASTS: NEWLY AWAKENED SYMPATHIES AND  
SHIFTING REPRESENTATIONS OF OTHER-THAN-HUMAN ANIMALS IN  
VICTORIAN LITERATURE

By

Teresa Sherman-Jones

THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

# THE BRONTËS AND THE BEASTS: NEWLY AWAKENED SYMPATHIES AND SHIFTING REPRESENTATIONS OF OTHER-THAN-HUMAN ANIMALS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

By

Teresa Sherman-Jones

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*, all published in 1847, illustrate Victorian society's understandings and misunderstandings of the emotional and intellectual capacities of other-than-human animals. Darwin's studies of human animality as well as newly awakened concern for suffering led to a shift in the way that humans and other-than-human animals were viewed. This shift both influenced and was influenced by literature. As compassion was promoted and humans began to re-consider animals as sentient beings and not automatons, the way that animals are represented in literature also changed.

These Brontë novels show that a society that condones the abuse and exploitation of animals – as workers, food, entertainment, and property – perpetuates a violent mentality and an acceptance of exploitation of those with less power. The novel having emerged as an exciting form of communication and commentary, during the Victorian era it had the potential power to reform and educate. Through their fiction, the Brontës consider Victorians' treatment and understanding of animals, as well as the human implications and consequences of cruelty. By drawing readers' attention to these issues, the Brontës explore the meanings of what it is to be human, and what it is to be humane.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents. I thank you, with immeasurable gratitude for teaching me compassion and love through your own generosity of both, your careful guidance and protection, and your endless support.

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction and Historical Context.....                                     | 1  |
| Emily Brontë' <i>Wuthering Heights</i> : Brutality, Violence, and Pain.....  | 10 |
| Charlotte Brontë's <i>Jane Eyre</i> : Captivity, Class, and Conscience ..... | 26 |
| Anne Brontë's <i>Agnes Grey</i> : Entertainment, Apathy, and Morality .....  | 43 |
| Conclusion and Closing Thoughts .....  | 63 |
| Works Cited .....  | 65 |

## INTRODUCTION and HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The nineteenth century in England was a time of developing concern with humanity's treatment of other-than-human animals, and of new ideas about the inherent rights of living beings. Kindness, now viewed as a moral virtue, was emphasized and promoted in society. Victorians were continuing to doubt the Cartesian philosophy of the *bête machine*, or the automaton animal incapable of feeling or thought. Scientific as well as social studies were recognizing that humans are not the only beings affected by physical stimuli and complex emotions. Compassion was encouraged, concern for suffering increased, and ideas and practices of cruelty began to come under question during the Victorian era. As notions of compassion were elevated, the concern of "for whom?" became relevant. Charles Darwin's evolutionary studies and revelation of human animality were both embraced and denied, but the uncertainty was increasing: is it *cruel* to mistreat non-human animals?

Three Victorian novelists who address – and encourage their readers to contemplate – this question in particularly unique ways are Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and Anne Brontë. Shifting perceptions of what constitutes cruelty and what it means to be a moral and humane being are at the heart of each of their novels: Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, and Anne's *Agnes Grey*, all published in 1847. Each of these writers has a different style, but all address important issues and consequences in the concern of cruelty and compassion, and the reflection of such concerns on the treatment of sentient beings. Emily Brontë's novel concentrates

particularly on abuse and violence, and its effects not only on other-than-human animals, but on humanity as well. Charlotte Brontë focuses on issues of captivity and arbitrary rankings of living beings, and Anne Brontë's novel addresses the theme of self-serving entertainment at the expense of others, and indifference to other's suffering.

Each of these motifs is integral to the understanding of what it is to be human, and what it is to be humane. These motifs are also especially relevant when considering the historical context of these novels, with an interest in contemplating Western humanity's interrelationships with other living beings, and particularly with marginalized groups, during an extremely influential time of change – the Victorian era. These three authors have unique tactics for expressing their concern with society's cruelty, and each addresses a different but important concomitant in relation to this issue.

Though neither Emily, Charlotte, nor Anne can be assumed to be particularly progressive or radical animal rights activists, when viewed through an animal-ethics lens, all three writers can be understood as proponents of compassion, and as intelligent and intuitive social observers. The Brontës were writing in a time when concern for animals was growing, and animal protection groups and anti-cruelty statutes were expanding. A large number of their audience was acutely (though freshly) aware of the significance of cruelty and compassion, and would have understood these novels through that new lens of awareness. Emily, Charlotte, and Anne each address the problems of cruelty to living beings, in direct as well as indirect ways. This issue of the humane is by no means insignificant both to the meaningfulness of these texts, and to the understanding that contemporary readers can glean by considering them through their historical context.

The Brontës demonstrate Victorian society's understanding (and misunderstanding) of the emotional capacities of fellow creatures, as well as how a society that condones the abuse and exploitation of animals – as servants, food, entertainers, and property – perpetuates a violent mentality and an acceptance of abuse of those with less power. In all three novels, human power struggles lead to exploitation of those with less autonomy – women, the poor, children, and other-than-human animals. These novels also, though, demonstrate that their audience – literate Victorians – would recognize these implications, and make the connections between the suffering of human characters and the suffering of other-than-human characters. Writing in a time when benevolence and kindness were suddenly meaningful (and fashionable) concerns, these novelists exemplify the Victorian mindset and its shifting understanding of animals and humans, as well as the newly awakened sympathies for the suffering of others.

In *Reckoning with the Beast*, James Turner argues that for the early Victorians who did not believe non-human animals to be capable of pain, their abuse of these animals was not exactly cruelty because: “cruelty implies a desire to inflict pain and thus presupposes an empathetic appreciation of the suffering of the object of cruelty” (Turner 2). For Turner, cruelty is defined by its intention. Though some (particularly early and pre) Victorians might have consoled themselves with the supposition that non-human animals cannot feel pain, even Descartes, who was notably influential in the circulation of that belief, was not entirely convinced of his own mechanistic theory of other-than-human life. In a letter of 1649, he wrote: “My opinion is not so much cruel to animals as indulgent to men ... since it absolves them from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals” (qtd. in Singer 208-9). Even this statement, though it demonstrates a

disregard for animal suffering, shows that Descartes knew that he was indulging the consciences of humans, and therefore sanctioning acts which allow humans to behave in a self-serving manner.

The Victorians' concern with morality and cruelty was immensely complicated by Charles Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and *The Descent of Man* in 1871. Though his grandfather Erasmus Darwin and other notable scientists and intellectuals had been broaching the topic of human animality and evolution for decades, Charles Darwin's texts were particularly and eminently influential among the intellectuals, and eventually the Victorian public. The scientific discovery of humanity's close relationship to beasts was disturbing for many. As Darwin wrote in 1837, "animals [are] our fellow brethren in pain, disease, death, suffering, and famine, our slaves in the most laborious works, our companions in our amusements" (qtd. Turner iix). Such an understanding of course is wrought with implication. If other-than-human animals suffer and enjoy as humans suffer and enjoy, then what does it imply about humans that we treat our "brethren" without concern for their well-being?

What Darwin referred to as humanity's "profound ignorance in regard to the mutual relations of the many beings which live around us" (37) began to shift, especially in the Victorian period, and though almost all Victorians would still see themselves as "better" than other species – as exemplified in the phrase "the lower animals," commonly used to distinguish humans as separate, and above, other animals – many, at any rate, also began to see other animals as worthy of consideration.

Though some denied human animality, and some still do to this day, Victorians were becoming uncomfortable with this new knowledge of their connection with other

beings, and its implications in regard to how they viewed and treated other-than-human animals. Many Victorian humanitarians, who thought themselves good and moral people, partook in such brutal exploitation of non-human animals as bull baiting, cock fighting, dog fighting, ratting, and vivisection, and were fine with beating their horses if they didn't walk quite quickly enough. Calling someone a "brute," a "beast," or a "wild animal" was considered derogatory, and thus the vocabulary of society indicates the mindset. The very idea of being animal meant that humans were like what they detested.

The new understanding of the interconnection between animals and humans, and the similarities in human and animal suffering and enjoyment, helped to lead to reform of the treatment of animals in two particular ways. In one way, recognition of human animality led some Victorians to become empathetic with other beings, and so to become more concerned with the well-being of other animals. Another way, and perhaps still more indicative of the time, was a mindset more concerned with human well-being than with that of other-than human beings: the recognition of human animality led those who feared what was animal in themselves to strive to separate and delineate humans from animals (Turner 69).

Thus control, rationality, and sympathy -- assumed still to be distinctly human traits -- were energetically praised and emphasized. Belief that humans are the only animals capable of spirituality and morality encouraged proponents of this belief to emphasize what they saw as distinctly human in themselves, while also suppressing what they understood to be more animalistic. Therefore morality -- and morals such as kindness, compassion, and empathy -- should be carefully observed. This idea that humans are the only animals with souls and moral capacities beyond instinct illustrates

characteristic anthropocentrism. But though the intention was particularly self-serving to humans as a species, the outcome was nonetheless useful to many animals, as laws and statutes restricting some blood sports and other previously accepted abuses of animals, as well as many prominent and widespread animal welfare organizations, came to be during the mid-1800s.

Further complicating the complex feelings about cruelty and compassion, industrialization and urbanization brought people together in close groups, and working conditions made suffering more visible and flagrant. Society began to concentrate on empathy and compassion as noble characteristics in order to try to alleviate the disgust and shame of conditions. As morality became emphasized as noble aspiration, humanitarian and philanthropic organizations were formed. Recognized animal rights and protection agencies were founded during this time, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), which was organized and formed in 1824 and acknowledged with royal status by Queen Victoria in 1840 (Verney 177) – just three years after she came into reign.

Though many Victorians recognized the problems and unethical nature of child labor, human slavery, and poorhouses, most were also wary of social upheaval and dissent. Thus, as James Turner argues in *Reckoning with the Beast*, “a great many people remained trapped between sympathy and social caution. In this distressing situation, one wholly acceptable object of benevolence presented itself: the suffering beast” (37). Therefore, Victorians disturbed by suffering had an outlet for these feelings, by forming animal protection societies and educational facilities and pamphlets. Though Turner does not quite acknowledge the Victorians concerned with animals for animals’ sakes, it is

quite probable that his supposition is relevant for many Victorians, whether or not they recognized or even realized such motivational reasons within themselves.

Additionally, issues of ethics and morality were complicated by the dominant religion, Christianity. Britain's history of imperialist colonization, as well as their part in the slave trade, also speaks to the problematic view of the world in which many Victorians partook. This view -- ethnocentric, racist, sexist, and speciesist -- was not accepted by all. At the same time, Christianity was also an important reason for much of the dedication to ethics and kindness. Many moralists argued that, as God's creatures, other-than-human animals have a right at least to not be needlessly harmed. Victorian literary figures addressed the subject of cruelty and its varied categories: violence, physical and emotional abuse, slavery and captivity, subjugation, oppression, self-serving entertainment, and indifference, in varying ways. In particular the Brontës address such issues of compassion and cruelty in their novels.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë shows the connection between a societal mentality that dehumanizes people and the mentality that brutalizes animals. Humans who have been abused perpetuate the violence by being abusive. Emily's anti-hero, Heathcliff, is mistreated from childhood. He begins to crave power, controlling others' fates as best he can through his interactions with them. Heathcliff punches, kicks, strangles, and kills animals such as horses, birds, dogs, and humans, and because of his violence towards others he is often referred to by acquaintances as a beast or a wild animal. These moments of violence perpetuated by humans are misconstrued by characters in the novel as something distinctly animal, when they are most often



generated by the emotions of hate and revenge, and human civilization's distorted notions of power and success.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's focus is on Western society's desire to classify and label. Social hierarchies and arbitrary designations of importance are described in wrenching ways, with Charlotte's heroine and narrator, Jane, defying her "place" in society, and the oppression that comes with it. Subjugation and exploitation, as well as slavery and other forms of captivity, are harrowingly described by the novel's narrator. Injustices that result from classification of living beings – from the reduction of an individual to groups and labels – resonate throughout the novel as Jane not only experiences but also defies this way of looking at the world.

Finally, in *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë writes of both the effects of human entertainment at the expense of other living beings, and the damage that indifference and apathy can cause. The novel's heroine, Agnes, defies her employer by refusing to let the children in her care torture baby birds. The mother argues that her child's entertainment should be the priority, thus assuming the Cartesian and Biblical approach to other-than-human animals, particularly that put forth in Genesis. But Agnes disagrees with the idea that "dominion" should be abusive, candidly defies the Cartesian philosophy of the *bête machine*, but also asserts that even if one believes that other beings cannot feel pain, it is, as, Voltaire would express it, a "poverty of spirit" (222) to act with violence. Not only does such cruelty affect the victim upon whom it is inflicted, it also affects the morality and spirit of the inflictor.

It is therefore evident that all three writers address the shifting attitudes towards other-than-human animals and how moral humans should behave. Each Brontë does this

with differing levels of directness, but all three can be understood not only as social mirrors for Victorian society, but also as social commentators who helped to bring about change and justice in her society. Each writer encourages a more compassionate and conscientious understanding of the world and humanity's place in it.

EMILY BRONTË'S *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

BRUTALITY, VIOLENCE, and PAIN

*“I have no pity! I have no pity! The more worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething, and I grind with the greater energy, in proportion to the increase of pain.”*

As the Victorian era expressed an increasing discomfort with suffering, as well as a rise in empathy, other-than-human animals became a focus not only as regarded their welfare, but also as regarded the welfare – particularly emotional and spiritual – of humans. Though the nineteenth century was one of many brutalities and abuses, it was also a time of change. Literature of the era both reflected and helped to change the society in which it was created, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is no exception.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë reveals the connection between a mentality that dehumanizes people and one that brutalizes animals, and the effects that such mentalities have on society and individuals. At the same time, she encourages readers to reflect on the ability of other-than-human animals to feel pain, thus challenging the Cartesian philosophy of the animal as a *bête machine*, an automaton incapable of physical or emotional feelings. Brontë's characters acknowledge outright the pain inflicted on animals, and her readers, likewise, would have been much more open than previous

generations to such an understanding of the capacity of animals to experience suffering and distress.

As Victorians were becoming more concerned with the welfare of other-than-human animals, it was also becoming harder to ignore or deny that animals, like humans, can feel pain. The pain in the novel – physical as well as emotional – can be connected in both the Victorian readers' minds and the minds of contemporary readers with not only human suffering, but non-human suffering as well. Throughout the novel, similarities are drawn between how humans treat each other and how humans treat other beings. Cruelty is prevalent throughout the book.

Humans who have been abused in the novel perpetuate the violence by becoming abusive. Emily's anti-hero, Heathcliff, is mistreated from childhood. Denied autonomy as a child, he begins to crave power, and as he matures, controls others through his manipulations of them. Because of his violence towards others he is often referred to by acquaintances as a beast or a wild animal. His actions are seen as brutish and wild. Importantly, though, these moments of human violence are misconstrued as something non-human (and particularly brute-ish), yet they are most often occasioned by hate, revenge, and a distinctly human propensity to enjoy the suffering and torment of others.

“I have no pity! I have no pity!” Heathcliff confides to his housekeeper, Nelly Dean: “The more worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething, and I grind with the greater energy, in proportion to the increase of pain” (E. Brontë 17). With this confession, Heathcliff makes it clear that he does not believe the Cartesian philosophy that non-human beings cannot feel pain; rather, he wants to inflict pain, and gets enjoyment from such cruelty. As the worms writhe – assumedly in agony –

his enthusiasm for torture increases. He does not empathize with or compassionate anyone, and he even seems to get some pleasure out of his *own* self-torment and suffering.

Perhaps, though, it is the pain of the inflictor – Heathcliff himself – that he refers to. Then his statement would be relatable to the one that Isabella later makes, in which she states that “treachery, and violence, are spears pointed at both ends” (E. Brontë 202). Such an acknowledgment of the damage that one does to oneself when trying to hurt others is significant to the reader’s understanding of the novel. Brontë wants her readers to recognize not only the physical pain of cruelty, but the mental and emotional pain as well; it is not only the victim, but also the abuser who is wounded. Furthermore, Isabella continues, “[treachery and violence] wound those who resort to them, worse than their enemies” (E. Brontë 202). This is a significant viewpoint for Victorians, who were becoming more and more aware of the moral degradation of cruelty, to both humans and to other-than-humans.

It is the intentional violence of humans that Brontë encourages her readers to contemplate throughout her novel, and human violence can be particularly contrasted to the less selfish behaviors of other animals. Heathcliff hangs Isabella’s dog, Fanny, with a scarf, and Isabella, though she is witness to this violence, does not rescue her. Instead, she deserts Fanny to suffer and die, and takes off after Heathcliff, of whom she is enamored. Yet when Isabella later escapes Heathcliff – then her husband – and returns for a night to the Grange, Fanny (who was rescued by Nelly) is overjoyed to see Isabella again: “Fanny...yelped wild with joy at recovering her mistress” (E. Brontë 210). Fanny

does not hold on to feelings of revenge or resentment, unlike every human character in the novel. As Heathcliff tells Nelly:

“The first thing [Isabella] saw me do on coming out of the Grange, was to hang up her little dog and, when she pleaded for it, the first words I uttered were a wish that I had the hanging of every being belonging to her, except one; possibly, she took that exception for herself. But no brutality disgusted her; I suppose she has an innate admiration of it, if only her precious person were secure from injury.” (E. Brontë 174)

Though Heathcliff’s interpretation of Isabella is certainly hateful and in some ways unjust, he judges her cruelty against his, because she should have cared about Fanny (and Heathcliff believes that he has no reason to). Though Isabella refused to help Fanny when she was being strangled, Fanny still loves Isabella. Here we can see the contrast of personality (between Isabella and Fanny) which Brontë shows her readers through this novel – a contrast between the supposedly wild and unfeeling other-than-human animals, or “brutes”, and the deficits and brutalities of human animals. This complicates, and perhaps even refutes, the accuracy of Western anthropocentrism, as well as the Cartesian idea of the *bête machine* that has no emotional, physical, or intellectual capabilities.

Whether or not dogs are “capable” of complicated feelings of revenge and jealousy is not relevant. Many Victorians were beginning to believe non-human animals capable of complex emotions (largely a result of Darwinism and its influence on understandings of animality), but many looked at the perceived virtues of other-than-humans not as virtues of the animals themselves, but as lessons of virtues for humans. As James Turner puts it:

One was not supposed actually to imitate the animal, only the virtue. In fact, in this older tradition, the traits exemplified by animals were not virtues at all *in the animal*, merely more or less mechanical instincts. An

animal taught bravery [or fastidiousness, or loyalty] only in the sense that a heroic painting did. An animal's character in itself had no moral value; strictly speaking, an animal did not even have a character. (Turner 74)

Under such an assumption, Victorian readers would have commended Fanny's loyalty, though perhaps not her character. Even so, it was the trait of love and loyalty that Brontë was contrasting with the rather more selfish behaviors of humans. Whether or not Brontë was under the assumption that Fanny acted only out of "mechanical instincts" is not so much the point as is the significance of the contrast between actions and the ability to love. From a modern standpoint, the understanding that dogs (and all animals) do have personalities and unique characteristics, as well as the capacity for complex emotions *beyond* mere instincts, allows us to read the novel in another light. For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to look at the historical context, and to consider what effect such comparisons and contrasts would have on its readers of the nineteenth century. Fanny's actions are some of the only self-less and loving behaviors in the book, which is overwhelmingly engrossed with violence, cruelty, and pain.

One of the key components of violence that Brontë addresses through her fiction is that of intention. Even Mr. Lockwood, overall not a particularly cruel or unjust character, initially tries to caress Heathcliff's dogs only to find that they are vicious out of fear, and so tells Heathcliff that if a dog had bitten him, he would have set his signet on the biter (E. Brontë 8). It is at this utterance that Heathcliff's "countenance relaxed into a grin" (E. Brontë 8), and he warmed towards Mr. Lockwood (though slightly). Heathcliff enjoys harshness and encourages cruelty. Though the dog's intention would be only to protect herself (knowing that when a hand comes near her it means danger), Heathcliff and Mr. Lockwood feel that it would be appropriate to retaliate with intentional cruelty. It

is not a punitive action, nor one of self-defense: the inflictor aims merely to retaliate out of anger. Though one's understanding of Heathcliff's personal childhood experiences with abuse might suggest that he would be more empathetic to other victims, he is far from it. Rather, his one form of comfort seems to be to inflict as much and more pain on others as he himself suffered, but even this comfort is marred by its consequences.

As Nelly relates her narrative to Mr. Lockwood, she confesses to him that Heathcliff seemed, as a child, “hardened, perhaps, to ill treatment.” She continues, “He would stand [his foster brother] Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear, and pinches moved him only to draw in a breath, and open his eyes as if he had hurt himself by accident, and nobody but himself was to blame” (E. Brontë 44). Though through her continued narrative it becomes evident that Heathcliff not only blames, but resents Hindley to a monomaniac extreme, Nelly, as an overall trustworthy and level-headed narrator, also suggests that perhaps, initially, Heathcliff was not as resentful as he later became. It is thus understood that the abuse he lived with as a child was influential in shaping the angry, violent man he would become. Heathcliff became accustomed to cruel and derisive treatment, and rather than fighting back during the varied instances of this abuse, he internalized his resentment, becoming more and more violent as time passed.

Heathcliff's violence does not just manifest itself against those whom he feels have wronged him; any animal that crosses his path would surely regret it. Though when young he appeared to Nelly as though he felt “nobody but himself was to blame” (E. Brontë 44), Heathcliff essentially dedicates his entire adult life to tormenting and often destroying the lives of all those he does blame; anyone who ever wronged him, including, by association, their relations, as well as many (generally other-than-human animals) who



never caused him harm. ““He complained so seldom, indeed,”” Nelly muses, ““that I really thought him not vindictive. I was deceived completely”” (E. Brontë 46).

Like Heathcliff, his dogs are unused to kind treatment. Heathcliff tells Mr. Lockwood that his dog is ““not accustomed to be spoiled, not kept for a pet”” (E. Brontë 7). Instead, the dog has been ““hardened to ill treatment”” (E. Brontë 44), expecting malignity rather than kindness. Many animals in the novel shrink away from people, knowing the likelihood of being hurt if they are seen. Another example is Throttler, one of Hindley’s dogs. Isabella notices that when the dog hears Hindley’s steps in the hall, he ““tucked in his tail, and pressed to the wall”” (E. Brontë 166). Isabella escapes into a doorway, but she relates that ““the dog’s endeavor to avoid [Hindley] was unsuccessful; as [she] guessed by a scutter downstairs, and a prolonged, piteous yelping”” (E. Brontë 166). Similarly, later on in the novel, when Nelly describes Linton, she says that when his father, Heathcliff, holds a door open for him, Linton ““achieved his exit [from the room] exactly as a spaniel might which suspected the person who attended on it of designing a spiteful squeeze”” (E. Brontë 314).

Animals that behave ““badly”” by acting ferociously are conditioned by their experiences and the environment in which they live. Heathcliff is aware of this, and sustains the suffering around him, relishing the pain that he inflicts on himself and others. After Hindley has died and his son, Hareton, is invited to live at Thrushcross Grange, Heathcliff blackmails Nelly and the Lintons into letting Hareton stay at Wuthering Heights. To Hareton, he says, ““Now, my bonny lad, you are mine! And we’ll see if one tree won’t grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it!”” (E. Brontë 215). Heathcliff, rather than allowing Hareton to live a potentially happy life at Thrushcross

Grange, makes sure that he will be treated in much the same way as he himself was when Hareton's age. He recognizes his own "twisted" ways, and revels in the idea of taking part in the warping of another's life and character.

Thus, both people and dogs that are ferocious are accustomed to abuse and derision. An important distinction is the lack of vindictiveness in the non-human animals. Though they lash out in order to protect themselves, they do not, as Heathcliff and Hindley do, dedicate themselves to revenge. A connection can be noted though, in that their fierce behavior is linked with defense: Heathcliff attempts to defend himself by controlling the fates of those around him, and continues to lash out even when no threat remains. But in the meantime he suffocates any empathy, and because of this, suppresses the humane and human within himself, and so suffers more than any of his victims.

Conversely, those humans and other-than-human animals that are treated as pets and are given kind attentions do not fear people or attack them, and instead assume a trust which is broken once they meet Hindley or Heathcliff. The young Catherine Linton is a sure example of this, as, having only experienced a sheltered and humored existence, she is unable to fathom the cruel and manipulative agenda of Heathcliff, and so does not realize his danger until it is too late. Additionally, humans given mere privileges but shown no or little sympathy also run the risk of becoming spiteful and self-centered, as can be seen in Linton Heathcliff.

In the case of Heathcliff and Isabella's son, Linton, there is not just the issue of an individual's experiences shaping his or her character, there is also a complication of personality and behavior. Nelly Dean comments that Linton was treated kindly, but that others' indulgence of him and his wishes made him spiteful and self-centered. However,

Nelly, though generally a solid and insightful narrator, is wrong here: there is nothing particularly “kind” about how Linton is treated. He is merely humored and waited on, a fact which she herself later admits.

Linton’s situation is similar to his father Heathcliff’s, in that both have periods in their lives when they are simply waited on but otherwise ignored. Linton’s experience with this occurs during his illness at his father’s, and Heathcliff’s occurs during his foster father’s (Mr. Earnshaw’s) illness. During this time, the household is ordered to follow Heathcliff’s demands, as Heathcliff is a particular favorite of Mr. Earnshaw’s. Nelly comments that ““it was a disadvantage to the lad, for the kinder among us did not wish to fret the master, so we humored his partiality; and that humoring was rich nourishment to the child’s pride and black tempers”” (E. Brontë 47). Again the difference between caring for (and about) someone is contrasted with merely indulging him or her. It is also important, though, to note a difference in personality. Though the characters in *Wuthering Heights* do change their ideas and actions drastically based on their experiences, they also have differing capacities to surmount them.

Linton is also affected by his own brief time with his father. Though Heathcliff, Joseph, and Hareton indulge and wait on Linton, following his whims and orders, it is clear that none of them like him, and are far from loving or caring about him. Heathcliff uses Linton as a pawn, ordering his servants to see to his cares and follow his orders merely so that Linton can fulfill Heathcliff’s plans. In this way, Linton’s situation is similar to those of farm and other domesticated animals, who are kept alive particularly for the human “owner’s” benefit, and who are often sacrificed when the human chooses. Hens and chickens are fed and sheltered as long as they provide eggs, and cows and pigs

until they are slaughtered for meat and leather. Horses, too, are kept until they are no longer useful to their humans. Throughout the novel Heathcliff uses other living beings as though they are nothing more than pawns and amusements. He has no respect for sentience and relatively no remorse or shame for causing suffering. Heathcliff considers only his own gain in his relationships and interactions. In his son Linton's case, Heathcliff keeps him alive long enough to woo and marry Cathy Linton, which then gives Heathcliff control for revenge over her father and his property of Thrushcross Grange. Indeed, he even calls Linton a "puling chicken" (E. Brontë 239).

Heathcliff's idea of ownership over humans is reflexive of the mindset of ownership over any living beings. Just as humans treat other-than-human animals as possessions, so does Heathcliff treat his own son as one. He says to Nelly: "my son is prospective owner of your place, and I should not wish him to die till I was certain of being his successor. Besides, he's *mine*, and I want the triumph of seeing *my* descendant fairly lord of their estates ... that is the sole consideration which can make me endure the whelp" (E. Brontë 240). He also calls the young Hareton an "infernal calf" who should "begone to [his] work" (E. Brontë 240).

Like Heathcliff, Linton would be a pitiful character except for his hateful and cruel disposition. Much of his unhappiness is brought about because of his selfishness and lack of empathy. Of Linton, Heathcliff says: "Linton requires his whole stock of care and kindness for himself. Linton can play the little tyrant well. He'll undertake to torture any number of cats if their teeth be drawn, and their claws pared" (E. Brontë 315). Linton, like his father, is cruel and often heartless, but because of physical and

mental weakness, he will only torture those who cannot fight back. Heathcliff, on the other hand, relishes torturing both those able to fight back, and those who are unable to.

There are few redeeming qualities about Heathcliff, and he acts violently and manipulatively even to the one person he loves (Catherine) and the few people he tolerates (Joseph and Nelly). A complication that Brontë introduces with her novel is not just how personality and experience shape a person, but also what our natural reflexes and instincts would have us do. Hindley, during a drunken rage, holds his toddler son Hareton over the bannister and accidentally drops him; passing beneath, Heathcliff automatically catches him “by a natural impulse” (E. Brontë 87). However, as soon as he has set Hareton safely on his feet, he looks up, and, as Nelly describes it:

A miser who has parted with a lucky lottery ticket for five shillings and finds next day he has lost in the bargain five thousand pounds could not show a blanker countenance than he did on beholding the figure of Mr. Earnshaw above. It expressed plainer than words could do, the intensest anguish at having made himself the instrument of thwarting his own revenge. Had it been dark, I dare say, he would have tried to remedy the mistake by smashing Hareton’s skull on the steps. (E. Brontë 88)

In this moment of danger and surprise, Heathcliff’s reflex or instinct is to save Hareton. But as soon as he has time to consider, he wishes to have behaved differently; less kindly. Another moment when the reader almost believes Heathcliff to have some compassion is again quickly altered by his follow-up actions. After returning from Thrushcross Grange without Catherine on the day when Catherine meets the Lintons for the first time, Heathcliff tells Nelly what they saw there: ““Edgar stood on the hearth weeping silently and in the middle of the table sat a little dog, shaking its paw and yelping, which, from their mutual accusations, we understood [he and Isabella] had nearly pulled in two between them. The idiots! That was their pleasure!”” (E. Brontë 56).

But it is not because Edgar and Isabella were acting cruelly and thoughtlessly that Heathcliff believes them to be idiots: ““To quarrel who should hold a heap of warm hair...the petted things”” (E. Brontë 56), he scoffs. It is their spoiled behavior, and not their tugging at and hurting a living being, that disgusts Heathcliff. His jealousy and disgust at their pampered lives annoys him. He even calls the dog ““a heap of warm hair”” (E. Brontë 56), thus refusing to acknowledge worth in the dog’s existence.

Throughout the novel, Heathcliff’s cruelty is multiplied because it brings out the cruelty in others. Isabella comes not only to hate him, but to want to hurt him. She wants revenge (one of Heathcliff’s motivators). After escaping from Wuthering Heights and stopping at the Grange to rest, Isabella tells Nelly ““I’ve recovered from my first desire to be killed by him. I’d rather he’d kill himself!”” (E. Brontë 199). However, Isabella is also more rational about her actions, for though she admits: ““I experienced pleasure in being able to exasperate him,”” she continues, ““the sense of pleasure woke my instinct of self-preservation; so, I fairly broke free, and if ever I come into his hands again he is welcome to a signal revenge”” (E. Brontë 199). Isabella then relates the events that led up to her flight from Heathcliff, recalling a moment with Hindley in which he showed her a weapon he was planning to use on Heathcliff in order to exact his revenge.

She tells Nelly that Hindley was ““searching in my eyes a sympathy with the burning hate that gleamed from his”” (E. Brontë 202). Hindley asks Isabella if she is willing to be continually hurt without ever attempting retaliation, to which she responds: ““I’m weary of enduring now...and I’d be glad of a retaliation that wouldn’t recoil on myself; but treachery, and violence, are spears pointed at both ends – they wound those who resort to them, worse than their enemies”” (E. Brontë 202). Though Hindley’s

reaction to this assertion is to scoff at it, this is a morbid foreshadowing, for Hindley finally does attempt to shoot Heathcliff, and the consequential releasing of the knife from the handle slashes Hindley's wrist open, yet Heathcliff is not wounded. Though this literal wounding occurs, the mental degradation that arises from violent mentalities and desire for revenge is apparent throughout the novel, many characters going mad with anguish and hatred, and is indeed one of its prevalent themes.

Isabella did rejoice in her small acts of revenge, though she admits that she “wouldn't have aided or abetted an attempt on even *his* [Heathcliff's] life, for anything” (E. Brontë 204). Instead, she settled to hurt him with her words: “I couldn't miss this chance of sticking in a dart; his weakness was the only time when I could taste the delight of paying wrong for wrong” (E. Brontë 207). What Isabella tells Heathcliff, who is in agony over Catherine Heathcliff's death, is: “Heathcliff, if I were you, I'd go stretch myself over her grave, and die like a faithful dog” (E. Brontë 204). Isabella is again relating Heathcliff to an animal, although this one noble. Here we see an animal trait that is considered admirable – loyalty – at the same time that it is sneeringly regarded as dramatic and perhaps even ridiculous. Though loyalty, and particularly such self-less loyalty, was certainly admirable in Victorians' minds, Isabella is reappropriating this devotion as an absurd act. She is also suggesting that Heathcliff should be suffering more than he is, in itself an extremely painful accusation, and an unjust one. At the same time, she is insinuating that she wants Heathcliff to lay down and die.

Isabella tells Nelly that she “would rather [Heathcliff] suffered *less*, if I might cause his sufferings” (E. Brontë 207). Cathy Linton also resorts to Heathcliff's ways when Nelly observes that “Catherine spoke with a kind of dreary triumph; she seemed to

have made up her mind to enter into the spirit of her future family, and draw pleasure from the griefs of her enemies” (E. Brontë 330). It is evident that Heathcliff’s diabolical influence is not only his physical and psychological abuse of others, but also the consequence of his hateful behavior and mentality transferring to others and thus multiplying.

*Wuthering Heights*’s other anti-hero, Catherine Earnshaw, also becomes hardened by the treatment of her elders. Though Nelly admits her to be wild and wanton even during her father’s health, during her father’s illness and subsequent irrational fury and rigidity toward his children, Catherine becomes more inclement and spiteful. Mr. Earnshaw tells Catherine “I cannot love thee...I doubt thy mother and I must rue that we ever reared thee!” (E. Brontë 49). Nelly reflects that this made Catherine “cry, at first, and then, being repulsed continually hardened her and she laughed if I told her to say she was sorry for her faults” (E. Brontë 49). Throughout the novel, Catherine is often hateful and even brutal to those around her, including the ones she loves.

But it is in one very rare moment of compassion and vulnerability that the adult Catherine Linton speaks to Nelly in a stream of consciousness recollection of bird memories. Recently incapacitated by a fever and mad fit, Catherine is lying in her bed, plucking feathers out of her pillow. She arranges them by species, commenting aloud on the variety. When she gets to a particular feather, she says to Nelly:

“And this – I should know it among a thousand – it’s a lapwing’s; Bonny bird – wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor. It wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds touched the swells, and it felt rain coming. This feather was picked up from the heath, the bird was not shot – we saw its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons. Heathcliff set a trap over it, and the old ones dare not come. I made him promise he’d never shoot a lapwing after that, and he didn’t. Yes, here are more! Did he shoot my



lapwings, Nelly? Are they red, any of them? Let me look.” (E. Brontë 141)

Though Nelly scolds Catherine for what she deems childishness and takes the pillow from her, this moment is not “baby-work” (E. Brontë 142), as Nelly calls it, nor are Catherine’s ramblings nonsensical. Catherine is recalling a moment of shame, one of remorse for having been cruel. In all of the novel, both Catherine and Heathcliff show very limited capacities to empathize or even regret their violent and selfish behavior. But Catherine, in her own vulnerability and illness, recalls a time when she and Heathcliff were responsible for the vulnerability of others, by killing a mother bird and, consequently, her babies. This is also touching foreshadowing by Brontë, for, though the readers do not yet know that Catherine is pregnant (and it is unclear whether Catherine herself knew), Catherine dies in childbirth not long after. This moment then is hugely significant in its rarity, for it hints at the trait that most of the characters lack: empathy.

Though some characters care about each other, overall their first priorities are themselves. For instance, before this moment with the bird memories, Catherine (married to Edgar) is distraught at finding out that her sister-in-law, Isabella, is interested in Heathcliff. Though Catherine likes Isabella Linton, it is not so much out of concern for her as for jealousy and anger that she warns her about Heathcliff: “Nelly, help me to convince her of her madness. Tell her what Heathcliff is – an unreclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone. I’d as soon put that little canary into the park on a winter’s day as recommend you to bestow your heart in him!” (E. Brontë 118-9).

Of Catherine, Nelly has often observed, “she felt small trouble regarding any subject, save her own concerns” (E. Brontë 90). This is nonetheless true in this instance,

but Nelly also says that Catherine seems sincere when warning Isabella. She knows Isabella is just as likely to survive Heathcliff as a canary is the winter. ““He’d crush you like a sparrow’s egg, Isabella, if he found you a troublesome charge”” (E. Brontë 119), Catherine continues. She, perhaps more than anyone, is aware of Heathcliff’s flaws “besetting sin” (E. Brontë 119). Heathcliff and Catherine are so closely linked, that even a separation is torment. Catherine even tells Nelly: ““Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff!”” (E. Brontë 96).

And so the characters of *Wuthering Heights*, separated by pride, society, judgment, selfishness, and cruelty, represent the violence and lack of empathy that Brontë wants to show her readers. And her readers’ perceptions of such cruelty – to humans, other-than-humans, and the self – would be affected by “the era’s deepening concern for suffering” (Turner 60), and this newly awakened sympathy would thus develop concern for all the pain in the novel. Brontë’s portrayal of all animals as victims of suffering also illustrates the shift in understanding of animals not as automatons, but as sentient beings related to humans in their capacities for happiness and pain.

CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *JANE EYRE*  
CAPTIVITY, CLASS, and CONSCIENCE

*"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."*

As human treatment of other-than-human animals came under speculation, and sympathies for the oppressed and suffering expanded, the shift in animal representation, as we've seen with *Wuthering Heights*, was evident in literature. As with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is concerned not only with suffering and cruelty, but also, more explicitly than in her sister's novel, with conscience and human morality. What is the "right" thing to do, versus the "wrong" thing? And how do we live with our choices if we don't follow our conscience? *Jane Eyre*, in many ways, is about "that still small voice" (C. Brontë 211), and not only the ramifications for the individual who ignores it, but also for the beings – human and non – who suffer from this evasion of justice.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is progressive in many ways for its time. Highly critical of societal institutions of class and caste, Brontë begins the second edition of her novel (published in the same year as the first) with a preface which asserts "conventionality is not morality" (C. Brontë xv). This claim is woven throughout her novel, which tells the story of a young woman who lives her life conscientiously, striving for justice, kindness, and independence in a society which attempts to deny her each of these things in different ways. Throughout the novel, Brontë demonstrates the

connections between unfair social conventions which subjugate those with less power (including women, children, racial minorities, and other-than-human animals) and enslavement and captivity of living beings. The captivity is often literal, though it is sometimes figurative, as Brontë writes of oppression and struggles to exert one's own free will, rather than to be only obedient to the wills of others.

Jane Eyre's sympathies with those who are marginalized is not limited only to humans. Readers are distinctly aware (as is Brontë) of the interrelationship between oppressions and rights violations of humans, and oppressions and rights violations of other-than-humans, and so Jane's sympathy is for any subjugated sentient being. When, as a child, she is sent for to talk with Mrs. Reed, Jane is interrupted from her task of trying to open the window to give bread crumbs to a bird outside of her window:

My vacant attention soon found livelier attraction in the spectacle of a little hungry robin, which came and chirruped on the twigs of the leafless cherry-tree nailed against the wall near the casement. The remains of my breakfast of bread and milk stood on the table, and, having crumbled a morsel of roll, I was tugging at the sash to put out the crumbs on the window-sill, when Bessie came running upstairs into the nursery. (C. Brontë 26)

Though it seems that the bird will not get his bread after all, Jane is not one to be so easily distracted from what she has determined to do, nor from what is right: "I gave another tug before I answered [Bessie], for I wanted the bird to be secure of its bread: the sash yielded, I scattered the crumbs – some on the stone sill, some on the cherry-tree bough" (C. Brontë 26-7). Brontë's attention to detail, and Jane's attention to conscience and the feelings of others, makes for a conscientious narrative.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, like Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, is concerned with the treatment of humans and other-than-human animals, as well as with societal

injustices. Charlotte Brontë's focus, though, is more specifically on issues of captivity and enslavement, arbitrary class assignments and hierarchies, and subjugation and oppression of individuals and groups. Jane struggles throughout her life with the injustice of being made dependent because of her poverty, sex, and class, and argues – both verbally and through her actions – that rather than societal construct of hierarchies and class, one's character and life choices should be what defines one as “worthy” and “noble.”

Society's prejudices should not have sway in condemning nor condoning an individual (human or non) based on his or her label. For instance, when she first meets Mrs. Fairfax, she is curious to know more about the master of the house, Mr. Rochester. Mrs. Fairfax tells Jane that the Rochesters are an old family, with money and prestige: “The family have always been respected here. Almost all the land in this neighbourhood, as far as you can see, has belonged to the Rochesters time out of mind’ ‘Well, but leaving land out of the question, do you like him? Is he liked for himself?” (C. Brontë 107)? Jane asks. Rather than being dazzled (as Mrs. Fairfax and many others are) by Mr. Rochester's name and wealth, Jane is more concerned with how he lives his life, and if his character is as admirable as society views him due merely to his wealth.

Similarly, when Mr. Rochester explains the situation of his young ward, Adèle, and that she is his mistress's daughter, perhaps or perhaps not related to Rochester himself, Jane refuses to write the child off the way that others do. Rochester quizzes her: “Now that you know that it is the illegitimate offspring of a French opera-girl, you will perhaps think differently of your post and protégée: you will be coming to me some day with notice that you have found another place – that you beg me to look out for a new

governess, &c. – eh?” (C. Brontë 151. Jane’s response to him is indicative of both her character and her strong sense of justice, as well as of her disdain of social import given to family and prestige:

“No: Adèle is not answerable for either her mother’s faults or yours: I have a regard for her; and now that I know that she is, in a sense, parentless – forsaken by her mother and disowned by you, sir – I shall cling closer to her than before. How could I possibly prefer the spoiled pet of a wealthy family, who would hate her governess as a nuisance, to a lonely little orphan who leans towards her as a friend?” (C. Brontë 151)

It is consistently evident, then, that Charlotte’s heroine is one of remarkable compassion, feeling, and intelligence. One of her first kind teachers, Miss Temple, soothes Jane’s wounded pride and fear of being ostracized, after Mr. Brocklehurst announces to the entire school of Lowood that Jane is a liar, per the false accusations of her aunt, Mrs. Reed. Jane laments: “I have been wrongly accused; and you, ma’am, and everybody else will now think me wicked” (C. Brontë 70). Miss Temple’s simple but profound response to Jane is this: “We shall think you what you prove yourself to be” (C. Brontë 70). Miss Temple’s words, along with Jane’s own strong sense of self and justice, influence her actions and ideas throughout her life.

As a grown schoolteacher to the children of the local farmers and peasantry in Morton, Jane reflects on a group of her students, saying that they are “as decent, respectable, modest, and well-informed young women as could be found in the ranks of British peasantry. And that is saying a great deal; for, after all, the British peasantry are the best taught, best mannered, and most self-respecting of any in Europe” (C. Brontë 415-6). She continues this thought with “since those days I have seen paysannes and Bäuerinnen; and the best of them seemed to me ignorant, coarse, and besotted, compared with my Morton girls” (C. Brontë 416). Here we see again Jane’s disdain of power and

rank as indicators of character. We also see the deep respect that she has for hard work, self-respect, and kindness. Though Brontë does not necessarily make the connection between speciesism and snobbery, looking at the novel through this lens, we can see the connection between the oppression of humans, and the oppression of other-than-human animals, all whom are denied autonomy due to arbitrary societal constructs and notions of importance and worth. The label of other-than-human animals as “the lower creation” is an example of this.

Just as animals that have aesthetic beauty or charming characteristics are more likely to be protected or sympathized with (in the Victorian era, dogs, cats, and horses, though often abused, were also some of the first to be protected), so too were the orphan children who are charming and lovely more likely to be treated with consideration than those who were uninteresting or plain. As one of Mrs. Reed’s servants observes about the child Jane Eyre, ““if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that”” (C. Brontë 21). Even today, animals like koalas, tigers, bears, and elephants, though still often abused and exploited, are more likely to have support of the public for protection than such beings as toads, snakes, worms, or other creatures deemed less cute, pretty, or interesting. Of course, attraction can have the opposite effect as well; beauty can be a burden, as animals considered to be particularly beautiful or interesting are also exploited specifically for those reasons. Other-than-human animals with aesthetic appeal to humans are to this day captured as well as bred for pets.

Many animals, including birds, are and were kept in captivity because of their pretty feathers, and the millinery industry during the Victorian period was responsible for

“ten tons of wings” (Verney 124) being sold to Western markets in 1900, when “one kilogramme of feathers meant the slaughter of 700 egrets [and] a single ‘lot’ in a London auction house in 1900 was the product of the killing of 24,000 egrets. Two years before it was estimated that 1,500,000 egrets were being slaughtered in Venezuela alone” (Verney 124-5). Many other bird species besides the egret were also killed for the fashion industry. These birds were killed merely for their feathers, “[t]he caracase [*sic*]...left for carrion...[as] it was unpalatable” (Verney 125), just to make feathered hats for Victorian women.

We see many women wearing feathers in *Jane Eyre*, and often they are the kind of women who depend on beauty for power and influence. For example, there are the daughters Brocklehurst, whose beaver fur and ostrich plumes contrast with the plain uniforms of the Lowood girls (C. Brontë 63). Their fine and fashionable attire elevates them in society. The beaver fur and ostrich plumes come from exploited animals, and thus their esteem comes at the price of animals’ lives. Again, and later in her life, Jane notices the feathered outfits of gentlewomen who visit Mr. Rochester at Thornfield. She makes a connection to the women and birds, with such observations as “they flocked in” (C. Brontë 178), and “they dispersed about the room, reminding me, by the lightness and buoyance of their movements, of a flock of white plummy birds” (C. Brontë 179). Lady Lynn’s hair “shone glossily under the shade of an azure plume” (C. Brontë 179), and “the ladies, since the gentleman entered, have become lively as larks” (C. Brontë 184). Amy Eshton “chatters like a wren” (C. Brontë 184) and Blanche Ingram “seems waiting to be sought; she will not wait too long: she herself selects a mate” (C. Brontë 184). Such language associated with these wealthy and ostentatious women puts Jane in the part of



the bird watcher. In the corner of the room, hardly noticed or acknowledged, she considers the traits of the women she observes.

This is not the first time that birds are used as metaphors for humans (often women). Rochester, too, refers to the women in the house as birds, bidding them: “return to your nests, like a pair of doves, as you are” (C. Brontë 218) and not to worry about the scream they heard in the night. A scream, not incidentally, which Jane describes thus: “not the wildest-winged condor on the Andes could, twice in succession, send out such a yell from the cloud shrouding the eyrie” (C. Brontë 216). The scream, as Jane and the readers later come to find, is from Bertha, Rochester’s first wife, who is locked in the attic due to her madness. Bertha, often described as a confined or captive wild beast, is sectioned off and kept from society; a living being enslaved in a room. Not only is she kept captive in Rochester’s mansion, she was also brought to England from her home in Jamaica. Like so many birds, she was imported in order to fulfill a human desire: in her case, to fill the role as wife, and to help Rochester keep a fortune.

Jane herself has an affinity to birds, but wild ones, not tame or domesticated ones. During one of her earlier conversations with Rochester, he comments to her: “I see at intervals 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” (C. Brontë 145). To this, Jane gets up and leaves, saying that it is late and time for her to put Adèle to bed. But this is not the only time that Rochester will compare her to a bird, and specifically, an unusual one who is being held captive. Jane also calls herself a bird (one dependent on the scraps of Rochester’s hand) when reflecting how much she will miss him when he gets married to Blanche Ingram: “There was ever in Mr. Rochester (so at

least I thought) such a wealth of power of communicating happiness, that to taste but of the crumbs he scattered to stray and stranger birds like me was to feast genially” (C. Brontë 259).

Young women in Victorian society (at least young women of middle and upper class) were taught to sew, sing, and recite, and encouraged to look pretty and have entertaining accomplishments. Little Adèle, of whom Jane reflects: “there was something ludicrous as well as painful in the little Parisienne’s earnest and innate devotion to matters of dress” (C. Brontë 178), enjoys performing for groups and being admired for her beauty and singing, as do these women who play the piano and sing the accompaniment.

Wealthy or middle-class Victorian women, then, can be seen as related to birds in that they are often kept in captivity (within the home, domestic sphere, and social circle) and encouraged to perform and delight with their attentions to physical attraction and amusement. Rather than being a symbol of freedom, then, the birds in this case are ones in captivity, kept from that freedom and flight that is so natural to them. The way that birds are represented and treated in Western society – as innocent, weak beings, entertainers, and objects of beauty – is no more correct nor liberating than seeing women in this light. Such views categorize and label the individuals as dependent, and encourage stagnation in place and abilities. Like human women, birds are also exploited and abused, as well as shallowly admired, for these societally-ascribed traits and rankings.

As is evident through Jane’s (and Brontë’s) declarations about gender roles, women are kept from their potential of happiness and accomplishment, by being subjugated and relegated to the roles of the “gentler sex”:

It is vain to say human being ought to be satisfied with tranquility ... Millions ... are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings ... It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (C. Brontë 113)

It is not only women who are associated with birds, though. When considering Mr. Mason and Mr. Rochester, Jane reflects: “I think (with deference be it spoken) the contrast could not be much greater between a sleek gander and a fierce falcon: between a meek sheep and the rough-coated, keen-eyed dog, its guardian” (C. Brontë 200). Though the novel represents animals in a kind light, it also adopts the problematic understanding of animals in relation merely to humanly-ascribed traits. Sheep are meek, falcons fierce. Other-than-human animals are judged for the qualities that humans see them as having, but though animals were a fashionable and developing topic of consideration and deliberation for Victorians, humans’ understanding of animals was still limited, and often relegated to stale stereotypes and weak symbolism. Again, we can consider the temptation for humans to relate to or admire animals with traits that are admirable to humans, but consequently then to also condemn or dislike animals with traits viewed as less admirable.

Though her understanding of animals may be limited, Jane’s sympathy (and indeed, empathy) for them is significant. Her strong conscience (what Rochester calls “that still small voice” [C. Brontë 211]) and her understanding of justice, as well as her rebellion against that which is unjust and cruel, are strong within her even in her

childhood. As a young girl of ten, Jane has a very clear notion of justice. To her first true friend, Helen, she says:

“You are good to those who are good to you. It is all I ever desire to be. If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way; they would never feel afraid and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should. So hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again.” (C. Brontë 56)

Though Jane did not always stand up for herself, she first began by fighting her cousin and tormenter, John, after he threw a book at her head. During this moment, John repeatedly also refers to her as a “bad animal” and a “rat” (C. Brontë 5, 6), thus insinuating that to be a rat is an insult (a notion which unfortunately has not changed much since Victorian times). After this moment of rebellion (for which Jane was severely punished) she never went back to being submissive. Her words to Helen are an important indication of her ideas of justice, because she makes the distinction that when one is struck (or oppressed, or hurt in any way) “without reason,” the person who is thus abused must stand up for him or herself, in order to stop such injustices from reoccurring. If oppressors have nothing to fear, they can continue to hold power over those who fear to resist them. “I must resist those who punish me unjustly,” she continues, “It is as natural as that I should love those who show me affection, or submit to punishment when I feel it is deserved” (C. Brontë 56).

When Aunt Reed decides to send the ten-year-old Jane to Lowood charity school, she invites the administrator, Mr. Brocklehurst, to meet her, telling him that Jane is a wicked child, and a deceitful one. After interrogation and reprobation from both Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst, Jane, always concerned with justice, tells her aunt: “I will

say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty... You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love and kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity” (C. Brontë 33). Mrs. Reed is shocked by Jane’s outburst, and her hatred and resentment for the child increases. We come to find out, as does Jane, that Jane’s paternal uncle wanted to adopt her a few years later, but that Mrs. Reed, continually hateful towards her niece, told him that Jane had died. When Aunt Reed, on her deathbed, sends for the eighteen-year-old Jane in order to defensively confess, she says:

“I could not forget your conduct to me, Jane – the fury with which you once turned on me; the tone in which you declared you abhorred me the worst of anybody in the world; the unchildlike look and voice with which you affirmed that the very thought of me made you sick, and asserted that I had treated you with miserable cruelty. I could not forget my own sensations when you thus started up and poured out the venom of your mind: I felt fear as if an animal that I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me in a man’s voice.” (C. Brontë 252-3).

Throughout this conversation, the reader is very aware of the cruelty committed by Mrs. Reed both before and after the incident of her denying Jane an inheritance and a potentially happy life with her uncle, because, as she asserts to Jane: ““I disliked you too fixedly and thoroughly ever to lend a hand in lifting you to prosperity”” (C. Brontë 252). Not only, though, are we aware of Mrs. Reed’s cruelty, we are also aware, by this last line, that Mrs. Reed saw Jane as a complete subordinate, as non-human. She also seems to believe that if she were to strike an animal, it would have no reason to retaliate; the frightening idea for her is that such an animal would retaliate with a human voice and human eyes, and so suddenly be a different kind of a victim – one, assumedly, that she would be more hesitant to strike.

Mrs. Reed blames Jane for her own actions; it is a strange blame: ““You were born, I think, to be my torment: my last hour is racked by the recollection of a deed which, but for you, I should never have been tempted to commit”” (C. Brontë 253). She is resentful that her husband (Jane’s maternal uncle) took Jane in and treated her like one of the family. She even scolds Jane, in this final conversation, by saying: ““how for nine years you could be patient and quiescent under any treatment, and in the tenth break out all fire and violence, I can never comprehend”” (C. Brontë 253). It is Jane’s revolt, her self-defense, that appalls Mrs. Reed, and not her own cruelty and injustice. Jane makes attempts to console Mrs. Reed, and to forgive her. Her aunt, though, refuses to acknowledge her own wrongdoing, or to forgive Jane for fighting back.

Jane does not cease fighting back, and continues to stand up for herself. In the scene in the garden of Thornfield Hall when Jane and Mr. Rochester become engaged, Jane scolds Mr. Rochester for his insensitivity, assuming still that he is referring to Miss Ingram and not Jane as his future wife:

“Do you think I am an automaton? --- a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! I have as much soul s you --- and full as much heart! ... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is with my spirit that I address your spirit ... equal --- as we are!” (C. Brontë 268)

These lines about unfeeling automatons are reminiscent of Cartesian philosophy, but because Jane is refuting assumptions of her being one, readers are also aware of the faulty understanding of animals as *bête machines*. It is difficult when reading the lines: “Do you think that because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless” (C. Brontë 268)? to not associate this plea with other-than-human animals. With this

connection that we have already seen between birds and Jane, and the feeding of bread, birds inevitably come to mind during this declaration.

Pre-1800s, Western society often asserted that animals do not have souls – souls and hearts (feelings) were ascribed solely to humans. But during the Victorian era, some people began to recognize the spirituality of animals, and the idea that other beings have souls and feelings became increasingly more acknowledged – at the very least as a possibility. It seems quite probable, then, that Charlotte Brontë was connecting the views of other-than-human animals (specifically, in this instance, birds) with those of women and the poor; all have feelings, and all have the right to happiness. Jane asserts that she is equal to Rochester, despite societal conventions and customs.

When she is thus declaring that staying in the house with Rochester and his new wife would be too painful, Rochester says to her: “Jane, be still; don’t struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation” (C. Brontë 268). To which Jane responds: “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” (C. Brontë 268). Jane frees herself: “Another effort set me at liberty” (C. Brontë 268). These lines in which Rochester describes Jane as a desperate bird are countered by Jane’s assertion that, unlike a bird, she has the ability to free herself from her cage, to extract herself from Rochester, and to leave him. The connection with snaring birds is an important one, as the netting of birds – for sport as well as for monetary gain – was a particularly popular and exploitative relationship that humans had with birds during the Victorian era. As previously noted, staggering amounts of birds were killed for such frivolous reasons as fashion.

Symbolically, birds are readily viewed in studies of Western society and literature as representations of freedom, flight, and love. They are also, though, symbols of captivity in the novel, as Brontë draws connections between the captivity and servitude of people, and that of birds. A notable example of this is towards the end of the novel, when Jane finally returns to Mr. Rochester, now a crippled and depressed man. She observes the change in his once proud and powerful personality: “[I]n 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” (C. Brontë 461-2). Rochester is now a captive, enslaved by his own unhappiness and heart break, as well as the, as Jane calls it, “subjugation of [his] vigorous spirit to a corporeal infirmity” (C. Brontë 470), or a soul trapped in a wounded body.

In these lines, the reader is reminded of the cruelty involved in the captivity of living beings, and of the “woe” and “extinguished” vibrancy and happiness of any being relegated to a prison and made to live an unnatural and dependent existence. Uses of words such as “wronged” and “cruelty” express Jane’s (and, assumedly, Brontë’s) feelings about the captivity of birds and other beasts, and, particularly, of wild animals whose nature it is to be free and roaming. The reader is also given a vivid image of the desperate and unhappy Rochester. His captivity is different than that of an eagle, literally fettered, but it too is disheartening and oppressive, as is any cage.

Rochester’s likeness to a wild animal enslaved is continued with Jane’s comment to him: “‘It is time someone undertook to rehumanize you,’ said I, parting his thick and long uncut locks; ‘for I see you are being metamorphosed into a lion, or something of that



sort... Your hair reminds me of eagles' feathers; whether your nails are grown like bird's claws or not, I have not yet noticed” (C. Brontë 467).

Rochester, too, sees Jane as a bird, though one distinctly different from an eagle: “Gentle, soft dream, nestling my arms now, you will fly, too, as your sisters have fled before you” (C. Brontë 465), he bemoans, fearing that, like the many dreams he has had of Jane (Jane's “sisters”), Jane too will disappear and leave him again alone. But when he realizes that she really has returned to him, he says: “Oh, you are indeed there, my skylark! Come to me. You are not gone, not vanished? I heard one of your kind an hour ago, singing high over the wood; but its song had no music for me, any more than the rising sun had rays. All the melody on earth is concentrated in my Jane's tongue to my ear (I am glad it is not naturally a silent one)” (C. Brontë 470). The reader is again reminded of the pitiful fate of an enslaved bird, when Jane observes: “The water stood in my eyes to hear this avowal of his dependence; just as if a royal eagle, chained to a perch, should be forced to entreat a sparrow to become its purveyor” (C. Brontë 470).

This theme of slavery and entrapment is continuous throughout the novel, and Brontë points to many different types, while always making the connection among them in her readers' minds. British Imperial colonization and slave trade are also referenced in *Jane Eyre*. One of many examples is when, after their engagement, Jane and Rochester are riding into town together. Jane is upset that Rochester wants to buy her expensive clothing and jewels, and when he smiles at her she reflects: “I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched; and I crushed his hand, which was ever hunting mine, vigorously, and thrust it back to him red with the passionate pressure” (C. Brontë 285). Earlier in their

relationship, and before their engagement, Rochester tries to give Jane extra money for her trip to the Reeds'. Jane, however, refuses it: "I declined accepting more than was my due" (C. Brontë 237). She is unwilling to take more or less than the amount which is owed to her for her services as a governess. She also tells Rochester that if he were to dress her up in riches: "I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin's jacket – a jay in borrowed plumes" (C. Brontë 274).

When Rochester looks at Jane "as a sultan might...on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (C. Brontë 285), she tells him "I'll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio...so don't consider me an equivalent to one. If you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul, without delay, and lay out in extensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here" (C. Brontë 285). To this Rochester asks Jane what she would do while he was off "bargaining for so many tons of flesh" (C. Brontë 28) and she responds:

"I'll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved – your harem inmates amongst the rest. I'll get admitted there, and I'll stir up mutiny; and you, three-tailed bashaw that you are, sir, shall in trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands; nor will I, for one, consent to cut your bonds till you have signed a charter, the most liberal that despot ever yet conferred." (C. Brontë 285).

Jane again declares her resistance against enslavement, both of herself and others. She defies Imperialistic colonization and slave trade as appropriate or just societal practices. Rather, she would mutiny against such oppression, and free the fettered victims.

Echoing the assertion of the author that "conventionality is not morality," Jane continually defies the group by being an individual. When Mr. Rochester asks her if she would desert him if his friends and society turned on him, she responds: "I should

probably know nothing about their ban; and if I did, I should care nothing about it” (C. Brontë 215). Mr. Rochester responds: ““Then you could dare censure for my sake?”” To which Jane answers: ““I could dare it for the sake of any friend who deserved my adherence; as you, I am sure, do”” (C. Brontë 215). Jane, with her concern for the suffering and oppression of others, is both an example of a new shift in sympathy towards other-than-human animals in the Victorian era, and a progressive and unique character who helped to encourage such empathy and conscientiousness in a world full of cruelty, suffering, and oppression.

ANNE BRONTË'S *AGNES GREY*  
ENTERTAINMENT, APATHY, and MORALITY

*“When Master Bloomfield’s amusements consist in injuring sentient creatures, I think it my duty to interfere.”*

Of all the sisters, Anne Brontë is the most direct with her characters’ admiration of animals, and concern for their welfare. Like Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre*, Anne’s *Agnes Grey* is a conscientious and kind young woman, offended by injustices and disgusted by cruelty. *Agnes Grey* offers more detailed instances of animal appreciation and sympathetic representation than her other sisters do, but that is because they are each using unique styles in order to express their ideas and concerns. Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* is a decidedly more didactic and moralistic novel than her sisters’ novels are, as it is more direct and blunt in the narrator’s (and thus the author’s) ideas of the humane. It is with decided tenderness, for instance, that Agnes describes her pet pigeons: “I had fed...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 faintails” (A. Brontë 13). Here, as Agnes bids farewell to her companions before leaving for a position as governess to an unfamiliar family, we see her care in describing the birds, and in her distinction of their beings by recognizing “favourites” among them.

At the same time that the readers are given a more direct view of the heroine’s sympathy with and compassion for animals, so are modern readers given a historical

context for the shift in views of animals; no longer seen by the vast majority as mere possessions, nuisances, or automatons, animals in the Victorian Age (though assuredly still abused, exploited, and neglected) were also increasingly sympathized with, as the Victorian elite and public became more involved in acts of animal welfare and statutes which made some acts of cruelty towards animals illegal.

As James Turner notes, “statutory protection of animals began in England in the 1820s, followed in short order by societies to ensure it...[b]efore the 1820s, all efforts in England to outlaw cruelty to animals foundered on the still prevalent indifference ” (39). In 1822, Martin’s Act, which aimed to protect farm animals from abuse, was passed “with wide support from the clergy and magistracy of London” (Turner 39). With this act, “[c]ruelty incurred not merely the odium of the humane but a substantial fine and up to three months in jail” (Turner 40). Though many still abused and were never prosecuted, the passing of such an act is indicative of the shift in moral standards and ideas of the humane. Social reform and the consideration of animals as worthy of protection from pain also acknowledged that animals do feel pain, thus refuting the longstanding Cartesian philosophy.

As compassion became a virtue and cruelty a crime, such statements as “the stout, well-fed pony – the old favourite that we had fully determined should end its days in peace, and never pass from our hands...” (A. Brontë 8) became more common-place as humans considered that: “People could rightfully take advantage of ‘the strength of a horse, the predatory instinct of a cat, the watchfulness of a dog,’ and so forth. But to drive an animal beyond its capacities or to employ it in a way unsuited to its native abilities was unnatural and therefore wrong” (Turner 73). Victorians were not necessarily opposed

to exploiting other-than-human animals, or using them for human gain (after all, Victorian society was largely dependent on animals for transportation, food, and labor) as long as the animals were treated with relative consideration and care, and not pushed beyond their limits.

Hence, it was perfectly acceptable for a horse to be utilized as a servant for mankind, as long as said horse was not treated with unkindness or made to do things unnatural to him or her (for instance, to perform feats or tricks beyond his or her natural capacity). This was the theory, but of course abuse was still rampant, especially with working animals, as many people considered them to be, above all else, property. More Victorians, though, were becoming appalled at the whipping and spurring of horses, and so more laws were made to limit such treatment, which before the mid-nineteenth century was a common and overall-unquestioned practice.

Indeed, though, it is important that we not be too hasty in assuming that Agnes's concern for animals was a common one; as we can see from her first observation of Master Bloomfield, the seven-year-old boy of whom she is the governess. Agnes notices that as he plays with his rocking horse, he "made [Agnes] stand for ten minutes, watching how manfully he used his whip and spurs" (A. Brontë 18). Agnes's reaction is to tell the child that "he was a capital rider, but I hoped he would not use his whip and spurs so much when he rode a real pony" (A. Brontë 18). Discouragingly, the boy responds: "'Oh yes, I will!' ... [and] laying on with redoubled ardor. 'I'll cut into him like smoke! Eeh! My word! But he shall sweat for it!'" (A. Brontë 19). Agnes is shocked, but hopes that in time she might "be able to work a reformation" (A. Brontë 19) of the child's sentiments and behavior. The Greys, then, in their concern for the well-being and "peace" of the

family pony, represent an increasing Victorian sentiment, if not an altogether common one.

After this display, Tom Bloomfield leads his new governess Agnes into the Bloomfield garden. She notices “certain apparatus of sticks and cord” (A. Brontë 20) and asks him what they are for. Tom tells her that they are for birds (A. Brontë 20). Agnes then questions Tom about what he does with the birds, once caught, and he answers: “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” (A. Brontë 20). When Anne asks why he intends to do “such a horrible thing” (A. Brontë 20) he answers “for two reasons; first, to see how long it will live – and then, to see what it will taste like” (A. Brontë 20).

Tom’s intentions are completely self-serving, and not only that but downright cruel and barbarous. Like so many Cartesian scientists, he is interested only in his individual gain of information, and not in the harm that he is causing to get it. A very particular and important animal rights issue that was much debated during the Victorian era is that of vivisection, or the dissection of an animal while still alive. Typically dogs or cats were used for this experimentation, and even in the 1700s people were arguing against this practice as inhumane and cruel. Not only the RSPCA but also the Animals’ Friends Society and many other anti-vivisection groups were appalled by this practice and tried to outlaw it. As Turner points out, “[a]nimal experimentation became the principal focus for the anxiety and dread stirred in Victorian minds by the thought of pain” (88).

After Tom tells Agnes his intentions for the bird, she says to him: “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 yourself?’” (A. Brontë). Tom’s answer is particularly disturbing, because, rather than deny that birds have feelings (and so possibly hold that view) he says ““Oh, that’s nothing! I’m not a bird, and I can’t feel what I do to them’” (A. Brontë 20).

It’s important that we are noticing a notably *apathetic* view to suffering. Because Tom cannot feel the suffering of the birds, he does not care about it. He does not deny that they can feel pain, but instead argues that it has no effect on him. His interest in being entertained far surpasses any inhibition to cruelty, and the reaction of his parents and uncle to his behavior only serve to vindicate his behavior in his own mind. Tom Bloomfield is a character representative of a troublesome attitude during the Victorian period (as well as before and after it) which allowed for blood sport and abuse of other-than-human animals in the name of entertainment. That such practices as bull bating, dog fighting, cock fighting, and rattling could even be considered “sport,” and that circuses where animals were made to perform unnatural and dangerous tricks were (and are) seen as “entertainment” is problematic. And though actions had been taken to try to outlaw bull baiting since 1800 (Turner 15) and it was outlawed in England in 1835 (Pearsall 205) it was still being done for decades afterwards.

In a characteristically moralizing strain, Agnes tries to convince Tom of the immorality of his actions by telling him, after he says he cannot feel the pain of the birds, ““But you will have to feel it sometime, 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 what you have made them suffer’” (A. Brontë 20). Agnes, in telling Tom this, is doing two particularly important things. She is trying to help him save



himself, thus encouraging him to care about his own suffering, if he cannot care about that of the birds. This is a common tactic used by Victorian moralists and some animal rights activists of the time, who knew that one of the fastest ways to get change for animals was to suggest consequences for humans. She is also, of course, echoing the new idea that being cruel to other-than-human animals is wicked, and that those who behave cruelly – to anyone, but probably particularly to the “innocent” (A. Brontë 20) – are behaving sinfully.

Tom, though, refuses to care about what Agnes tells him. He says he will not pay for his behavior, because his father did the same when he was a child. Not only is it something that Mr. Bloomfield used to do, he encourages his son to continue this brutality: ““Last Summer he gave me a nest full of young sparrows, and he saw me pulling off their legs and wings, and heads, and never said anything, except that they were nasty things, and I must not let them soil my trousers; and Uncle Robson was there too, and he laughed and said I was a fine boy”” (A. Brontë 20). To most Victorian sensibilities, such cruel acts would not have been seen as “fine.” The increasing strain of morality and sympathy within the Victorian mindset, as well as the revulsion towards pain, would lead many Victorian readers to be appalled at reading about such acts of violence towards helpless baby birds.

However, many acts like this were still being carried out in Victorian times, be it for human amusement (as in the case of Tom), for human fashion, for human food, or for any other human-centered motivation. More and more though, such horrifying acts were being kept from public view, for fear of reprobation, and so the women who wore twenty-six dead, stuffed songbirds on their fans (Verney 118) were able to distance

themselves from the torturous snaring and netting processes, as well as the killing involved in the manufacture of such an item.

Tom and Agnes will not see eye-to-eye on the subject, Tom claiming that it is not wicked because his parents do not tell him that it is, and Agnes arguing ““I still think it is, Tom; and perhaps your papa and mamma would think so too, if they thought much about it”” (A. Brontë 20). Agnes there determines in her mind that “they may say what they please, but I am determined you shall do nothing of the kind, as long as I have power to prevent it” (A. Brontë 20). She reflects: “I thought if he had any affections at all, I would endeavor to win them; and then, in time, I might be able to show him the error of his ways” (A. Brontë 21).

Like other animal welfare activists and the beginnings of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Agnes tries first to win-over and educate her pupil by encouraging him to consider his better nature. The RSPCA started as a group of people who wanted to enforce statutes and bring to legal justice those who disobeyed them and behaved cruelly to animals (Turner 40). They soon found, however, that their endeavors were better used as educators; to encourage people to see their sympathetic and concerned view of animals was far more effective than their attempts at prosecution. Because of their level-headed and sympathetic pleas, the RSPCA was seen largely as a cultivated and sophisticated group, and so attracted powerful and distinguished members. Sympathy for other-than-humans was becoming fashionable.

Though such impressive expansion of animal welfare groups indicates the shift in concern and compassion for other-than-human animals and humanity’s treatment of them, Agnes’s experiences with the Bloomfields illuminates the still very relevant and

present need for more change. Her time with the Bloomfields is miserable. “My pupils had no more notion of obedience than a wild, unbroken colt” (A. Brontë 25) she reflects, and “other children might be guided by the fear of anger, and the desire of approbation; but neither the one nor the other had any effect upon these” (A. Brontë 25). Though she recognizes that “Patience, Firmness, and Perseverance were [her] only weapons” (A. Brontë 26), she must also be diplomatic and careful (as anyone attempting to reform others). During prayers, Agnes “would remind [the children] of the sins of the past day, solemnly, but in perfect kindness, to avoid raising a spirit of opposition” (A. Brontë 26). “I thought,” she writes, “if I could struggle on with unremitting firmness and integrity, the children would, in time, become more humanized” (A. Brontë 32).

The idea of humans as kind, civilized, manageable beings is recurrent in *Agnes Grey*, and so again brings up the notion that Victorians, fearing their own animality (and their view of what it means to be animal) wanted to develop and promote what they saw as distinctly human within themselves. This is one reason that morality issues became so popular during the Victorian era, though certainly not the only one. An additional fear, as is relevant in Agnes’s concern for Tom and his morality, is the fear that “habitual cruelty to animals predisposes us to acts of cruelty towards our own species”

(qtd. in Turner 55). In the late 1600s, John Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, argued for the importance of teaching children to treat fellow animals with kindness, stating that “the custom of tormenting and killing of beasts, will, by degrees, harden their minds even towards men; and they who delight in the suffering and destruction of inferior creatures, will not be apt to be very compassionate or benign to those of their own kind” (225-6). This Lockean argument was earnestly adopted not only

by Romantic intellectuals, but by many Victorians after them. It again suggests that the strong concern for human welfare was a large motivation in promoting animal welfare.

The Bloomfield children's uncle, Mr. Robson, like Mr. Bloomfield, can be seen as a representation of past generations' unconcern with other-than-human suffering. They continue their behaviors – and encourage new generations to continue them – without concern or care for their implications to others. As Agnes points out, she “disliked [Mr. Robson's] coming [to visit] ... [because of] the harm he did the children – encouraging their evil propensities” (A. Brontë 42). Again, readers are reminded both of the “evil” of cruelty, as well as the effect it has on the minds and behaviors of those committing it. Mr. Robson “encouraged Tom's propensity to persecute the lower creation, both by precept and example” (A. Brontë 43).

And, as he frequently came hunting on the Bloomfields' grounds, he would bring his hunting dogs and, Agnes, says, “he treated them so brutally that, poor as I was, I would have given a sovereign any day to see one of them bite him, providing the animal could have done it with impunity” (A. Brontë 46). Mr. Robson, “when in a very complacent mood” (A. Brontë 43), would sometime take his niece and nephew “bird-nesting”: “A thing,” as Agnes says, “that irritated and annoyed me exceedingly, as, by frequent and persevering attempts, I flattered myself I had partly shown them the evil of this pastime, and hoped, in time, to bring them to some general sense of justice and humanity” (A. Brontë 43). Again, readers notice the association of the words “justice and humanity,” and the significant implication that the two should be connected. Also, that humanity and the humane are linked in Agnes's mind, at least ideally.

One time, after such an excursion, the children returned to the garden “with a brood of little callow nestlings” (A. Brontë 43). After fighting over the birds, Tom claimed them all for himself, because his uncle had given them to him: “Exultantly, [he laid] the nest [of the five baby birds] on the ground and [stood] over it, with his legs wide apart, his hands thrust into his breeches-pockets, his body bent forward, and his face twisted into all manner of contortions in the ecstasy of his delight” (A. Brontë 44). He tells Agnes ““you shall see me fettle ’em off. My word, but I *will* wallop ’em! See if I don’t now! By gum! but there’s rare sport for me in that nest”” (A. Brontë 44). Agnes tells Tom that she ““will not allow”” him to torture the birds, and that either he must bring them back where he got them, and so give them a chance to be cared for and survive, or that they must be killed at once so as not to suffer:

“But you don’t know where that is, madam. It’s only me and uncle Robson that knows that.”

“But if you don’t tell me, I shall kill them myself – much as I hate it.”

“You daren’t. You daren’t touch them for your life! because you know papa and mamma, and uncle Robson would be angry. Ha, hah! 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.”

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 endeavored 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 this relation, I dropped the stone upon his intended victims, and crushed them flat beneath. (A. Brontë 44)

This act, obviously a difficult and heart-wrenching one for Agnes, shows her true dedication to upholding justice and doing what is right. In this situation, the least suffering that the nestlings could endure would be to be killed immediately. Prolonged

suffering of starvation, or torturous acts by Tom, would be far more cruel. Though Agnes does not have the power or ability to bring the babies back to their parents, or to take care of them on her own, she does have the power to do the best that she can, and this extreme act on her part exemplifies her strong sense of morality. She also refers to it as “her duty” (A. Brontë 44), thus implying that anything less than helping the birds would be irresponsible and wrong.

Mr. Robson, who is passing by directly after this incident, and “pausing to kick his dog” (A. Brontë 45) is delighted by Tom’s rage, saying ““Damme, but the lad has some spunk in him too! Curse me, if ever I saw a nobler little scoundrel than that!”” (A. Brontë 45). He tells Tom that he will get another nest for him tomorrow, to which Agnes tells Mr. Robson, ““If you do, Mr. Robson, I shall kill them too”” (A. Brontë 45). Mr. Robson leaves with a scoff, but this is not the end of Agnes’s troubles. Later confronted by her employer, Mrs. Robson, she is told:

“I am sorry, Miss Grey, you should think it necessary to interfere with Master Bloomfield’s amusements; he was *very* much distressed about your destroying the birds.”

“When Master Bloomfield’s amusements consist in injuring sentient creatures,” I answered, “I think it my duty to interfere.”

“You seemed to have forgotten,” said she, calmly, “that the creatures were all created for our convenience.”

I thought that doctrine admitted some doubt, but merely replied – “If they were, we have no right to torment them for our amusement.”

“I think,” said she, “a child’s amusement is scarcely to be weighed against the welfare of a soulless brute.”

“But, for the child’s own sake, it ought not to be encouraged to have such amusements,” answered I. (A. Brontë 45-6)

This moment between Agnes and Mrs. Bloomfield is significant. A young governess on her first employment, Agnes has very little rights, and very little say, especially when it comes to the teaching of her pupils. Her tempered and yet pertinacious replies to Mrs.

Bloomfield show her strength against adversity, as well as her strong beliefs in justice. Because Mrs. Bloomfield does not believe that any other beings than humans have souls, Agnes must argue for Tom's sake, for his morals and his character. She must try to convince Mrs. Bloomfield that if she does not care about the birds or their souls, her concern for her son and his might lead her to a similar conclusion about the wickedness of his cruelty. Mrs. Bloomfield, however, is convinced of no such thing, and leaves Agnes with scorn. Agnes is dismissed not long after.

Despite Agnes's concern with other-than-human animals, there is still a notion of superiority, though the key is not to abuse it. Agnes calls dogs "the lower creation" (A. Brontë 43), as they often were referred in the Victorian era. As another instance, Mrs. Brown notes that her cat cannot be reasonably expected to uphold Christian manners (A. Brontë 92). Additionally, when Agnes's new pupils in the Murray household determine to gossip, Agnes questions Miss Rosalie Murray: "How can you expect [Mrs. Brown] to keep her promises better than her more enlightened mistress?" (A. Brontë 121).

The idea is not so much a plea for egalitarianism, as an understanding of one's responsibility and duty as one who is "superior" – intellectually, morally, and hierarchically within the class system – to set a good example and to uphold what is "better". This view is very closely related to the idea that, in order to try to tame the fears of human animality, many people tried to suppress what they believed to be more animal in themselves, and to promote what they felt were their "higher" capabilities, in order to distinguish themselves from the "lower orders," both human and non. Agnes genuinely cares about other-than-human animals, and is concerned with their welfare. She is also,

though, functioning within Victorian societal mindset, and is particularly concerned with her own morality, and the morality of other humans.

The two young misses Murray are quite selfish and vain, and though in the position to help their less fortunate neighbors, they often make promises to do so and never keep them. As Agnes remarks upon first getting to know her new pupils, “they, chiefly owing to their defective education, comported them towards their inferiors in a manner that was highly disagreeable to witness. They never in thought exchanged places with them; and, consequently, had no consideration for their feelings, regarding them as an order of beings entirely different from themselves” (A. Brontë 84). Agnes is concerned with the girls’ lack of empathy and consideration, and with their distancing themselves from other humans who are not as privileged as themselves. Their consideration of the poor as “entirely different beings” is also significant, as the girls have no real concern or pity for other-than-human animals, or for anyone but themselves, and so by viewing themselves as completely separate from others, they do not sympathize.

Because the young ladies refuse to fulfill promises of such simple responsibilities as reading to an ill neighbor, Agnes fulfills these promises for them. On such an occasion, when visiting with Mrs. Brown, a neighboring widow whose eyesight is suffering, Agnes notices that Mrs. Brown had “a small sackcloth cushion at her feet, placed for the accommodation of her gentle friend the cat, who was seated thereon, with her long tail half encircling her velvet paws, and her half-closed eyes dreamily gazing on the low, crooked fender” (A. Brontë 86). This benevolent and comforting imagery of a woman who loves her cat instantly cues the reader, per the rest of the book (and of course



Agnes's own judgment and reflections) that Mrs. Brown is one of the good characters. She and Agnes and Agnes's family – with their compassion and morality – are contrasted with the Bloomfields, the Murrays, and even the Rev. Hatfield, and their less Christian cruelty toward others (and particularly toward the helpless non-human animals that they encounter).

During this visit, indeed, Mrs. Brown compares the hateful Mr. Hatfield, the rector, to the new curate, Mr. Weston. Mr. Hatfield scolds and upset his poor parishioners, “represent[s] the Deity as a terrible task-master, rather than a benevolent father” (A. Brontë 2), and as Mrs. Brown relates, “kicked my poor cat right across th’ floor” (A. Brontë 89) and told Mrs. Brown to not bother him anymore with her concerns of salvation and piety, for, as he murmured to Mr. Weston, ““she’s a canting old fool”” (A. Brontë 91). Differing drastically from Mr. Hatfield, Mr. Weston visits the sick, the poor, and the less fortunate parishioners, and encourages them, like he encourages Mrs. Brown, with words and thoughts such as “God IS LOVE, and the more of love we have within us, the nearer we are to Him, and the more of His spirit we possess” (A. Brontë 93).

Mrs. Brown tells Agnes that Mr. Weston “spake so civil like – and when th’ cat, poor thing, jumped on to his knee, he only stroked her, and gave a bit of a smile: so I thought that was good sign; for once, when she did so to th’ rector, he knocked her off, like as it might be in scorn or anger, poor thing” (A. Brontë 92). Again, the readers see the contrast between a compassionate, humble, and kind person like Mr. Weston, and a self-serving, spiteful, and vain person like Mr. Hatfield. Agnes, and assumedly Brontë, want readers to make these moral judgments, to consider the difference in kindness, and

to understand that those who are kind are the good characters, and those who are unkind the bad. Deeply concerned with morality, Brontë's novel encourages readers to make moralistic distinctions between the characters, and to judge them by their actions and ethics, and not by their blind quoting of scripture.

When Mrs. Brown's cat goes missing, she fears the gamekeepers might have killed or tormented her, or someone might have set their dogs on her, "as they did *many* a poor thing's cat" (A. Brontë 99). But when Mr. Weston comes to Mrs. Brown's, with her cat in his arms, he explains "I've delivered your cat ... from the hands, or rather the gun of Mr. Murray's gamekeeper ... take care of it ... and don't let it go near the rabbit warren, for the gamekeeper swears he'll shoot it, if he sees it there again. He would have done so to-day, if I had not been in time to stop him" (A. Brontë 100). Such actions by gamekeepers (men hired, not incidentally, to care for and breed animals so that they can be used for hunts and other human entertainment) was not uncommon, and Mr. Weston's saving of the cat, particularly for Mrs. Brown's but also for the cat's sake, encourages Agnes to admire him even more.

Agnes, not only concerned with the morality of others, but also with her own, begins to fear that the behaviors and attitudes of her pupils, the Murrays, will affect her own character and personality, for, as she considers: "habitual associates are known to exercise a great influence over each other's minds and manners ... And, I, as I could not make my young companions better, feared exceedingly that they would make me worse" (A. Brontë 97). She further reflects: "Already, I seemed to feel my intellect deteriorating, my heart petrifying, my soul contracting, and I trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become deadened, my distinction of right and wrong confounded" (A. Brontë 97).

She is aware of society and its impact on individuals, and so tells Rosalie, after she encourages and then spurns Mr. Hatfield in his proposal of marriage: “The fault is partly in society, and partly, I should think, in your immediate neighbours, and partly, too, in yourself” (A. Brontë 127).

Agnes, though not happy at the Murrays', is able to find some enjoyment both with the possibility of an encounter with Mr. Weston, and with the companionship of Snap, “a little rough terrier ... the property of Miss Matilda [Murray]; but [Miss Matilda] hated the animal, and intended to sell it, alleging that it was quite spoiled. It was really an excellent dog of its kind; but she affirmed it was fit for nothing, and had not even the sense to know its own mistress” (A. Brontë 110). This observation shows both the idea of the dog's being “property,” and therefore sellable, and the contempt that Matilda Murray holds for the dog, since he offers her no satisfaction or benefit. This sentiment is a common one, particularly as we look at Victorian mindset and the notion that other-than-human animals should benefit humanity in some way, but Agnes's response to the dog reflects the newer belief that the dog is worthy of attention and love, regardless. Matilda had bought Snap as a young puppy, but tired of nursing him, and so Agnes had cared for Snap and so “of course, had obtained its affections; a reward,” she says, “I should have greatly valued and looked upon as far outweighing the trouble I had had with it, had not poor Snap's grateful feelings exposed him to many a harsh word and many a spiteful kick and pinch from his owner” (A. Brontë 110).

But Agnes “could not make the dog hate [her] by cruel treatment; and [Matilda] would not propitiate him by kindness” (A. Brontë 111) and so the dog is destined to be sold. Agnes reflects: “Snap, my little dumb, rough-visaged, but bright-eyed, warm-

hearted companion, the only thing I had to love me, was taken away, and delivered over to the mercies of the village rat-catcher, a man notorious for his brutal treatment of his canine slaves” (A. Brontë 143-4). With this observation, we see an echoing of Darwin’s sentiment – as well as Charlotte Brontë’s/Jane Eyre’s – of animals as slaves for humans, at the mercy of their owners (and often abusers).

Before Snap is sold, however, Agnes and Snap, on a walk, run into Rosalie Murray with Mr. Hatfield, and, when Snap pulls at Rosalie’s skirts, “Mr. Hatfield, with his cane administered a resounding thwack upon the animal’s skull, and sent it yelping back to me, with a clamorous outcry that afforded the gentleman great amusement” (A. Brontë 113). Agnes “stooped to caress the dog, with ostentatious pity to shew [her] disapproval of his severity” (A. Brontë 113), an action which is ignored by Mr. Hatfield who pays no attention either to her or her disdain, as she is a mere hireling, and as he is comfortable in his cruelty. Mr. Weston’s character, though, is again contrasted with Mr. Hatfield’s, as later (and unbeknownst to Agnes) he buys Snap from the rat-catcher to whom Matilda had sold him, and so gives him a kind and loving home.

On a later walk with Matilda, Agnes runs into Mr. Weston once more. Matilda’s hunting dog chases a hare into the woods, and Matilda comes back with “the lacerated body” of the hare. Agnes relates the conversation:

“Was it your intention to kill that hare, or save it, Miss Murray?” asked Mr. Weston, apparently puzzled at her gleeful countenance.

“I pretended to want to save it,” she answered, honestly enough, “as it was so glaringly out of season; but I was better pleased to see it killed. However, you can both witness that I couldn’t help it; Prince was determined to have her; and he clutched her by the back, and killed her in a minutes! Wasn’t it a noble chase?”

“Very! for a young lady after a leveret.”

There was a quiet sarcasm in the tone of his reply ...

I replied that I saw no fun in the matter ...

“Didn’t you see it doubled – just like an old hare? and didn’t you hear it scream?”

“I’m happy to say I did not.”

“It cried out just like a child!”

“Poor little thing! What will you do with it?” (A. Brontë 150-1)

Matilda leaves the body at a farmhouse so as not to get in trouble. It is her reactions, contrasted with those of Mr. Weston and Agnes, that are particularly telling of their individual personalities and ideas of acceptable treatment of animals. Whereas Matilda enjoys blood sports, Mr. Weston and Agnes are not at all entertained by the suffering of a living being. Their similar viewpoints sets up a love interest that is subtle and yet quite profound in the novel.

As the novel progresses and Agnes continues to fall more in love (though reservedly and secretly) with Mr. Weston, she become more concerned with her own lack of beauty and pretty charms. She knows “it is foolish to wish for beauty” (A. Brontë 134), and that beauty of mind and heart is more important than beauty of face and body, but she also recognizes:

We are naturally disposed to love what gives us pleasure, and what more pleasing than a beautiful face ... when we know no harm of the possessor at least? A little girl loves her bird ... Why? ... Because it lives and feels, because it is helpless and harmless. A toad, likewise, lives and feels, and is equally helpless and harmless; but though she would not hurt a toad, she cannot love it like the bird with its graceful form, soft feathers, and bright speaking eyes. (A. Brontë 134)

Though Agnes presumes quite a bit about young girls, her comments are not farfetched, considering Western society – and particularly Victorian Western society – and its emphasis on beauty and disdain of what is considered ugly. Agnes understands that toads have just as much right and reason to be loved and sympathized with, but that is not the way of the world. Humans are often taught to admire birds, and to fear toads.

Throughout the novel, Agnes has brought up her concern with teaching and education. These thoughts, then, further illuminate the connection between society and behavior. Just as the Bloomfields and Murrays behave cruelly and selfishly because they were raised to be so, Agnes fears that her association with these negative traits will influence her own character. Thus, the importance of proper and good education, whether in schools or by good examples (set, most often, by those of “superior” class), people must be taught right from wrong, and to be continually reminded of it, or their own ideas on the issue might become influenced by the bad behavior of others. After finding out about the kind and thoughtful Mr. Weston, Agnes reflects: “I rejoiced that I had now a subject for contemplation, that was above me, not beneath. I was glad to see that all the world was not made up of Bloomfields, Murrays, Hatfields, Asbhys, &c.; and that human excellence was not a mere dream of the imagination” (A. Brontë 97). As Mr. Weston and Agnes marry at the end of the novel, it is clear that good is attracted to good, and they raise their children with consideration and care for others.

Though written from the point of view of a character concerned with animal welfare, we also see, of course, through this character’s run-ins and arguments with those of much less benevolent mindsets, that Agnes’s concern for animals was not universal; her compassion was, historically, quite unique and progressive. In fact, though Agnes refers to kissing other-than-human animals as entirely natural and relatable, we are reminded that it is not so to everyone, as with this line: “[I] kissed the cat, to the great scandal of Sally, the maid” (A. Brontë 14). In this way, like with the books of Emily and Charlotte, *Agnes Grey* is a novel both indicative of its time, and influential on it. As the Victorian understanding of other-than-human animals shifted, and “the era’s deepening

concern for suffering” (Turner 60) continued to increase, *Agnes Grey* serves as an important book both for and of the people.

## CONCLUSION and CLOSING THOUGHTS

The shift in ideas of other-than-human animals – and representations of them in literature – which occurred in the Victorian era is indicative not only of the new understanding of animals’ capacity for feeling physical pain and diverse emotions (a direct contradiction to the Cartesian theory of the *bête machine*), but also to the “heightened sensitivity to pain” (Turner 81). As Turner points out though, it was not just this “heightened sensitivity,” but also “a deeper, readier empathy with the pain of others” which led to the “Victorian revulsion of pain” (Turner 81). In recognition of their own animality, largely due to Darwin’s theory of evolution, Victorians were newly awakened to and mindful of the suffering of other animals, and thus more sympathetic to that suffering.

Though Darwin’s theory of evolution still upheld the idea of human superiority (in so far as it suggests that humans evolved from “lower animals”), it also did much to convince Victorians that animals and humans should not be seen in opposition or as a binary, but instead as interdependent and related. In addition to Darwin’s influential theories, urbanization and industrialization brought suffering into plain sight, making it more difficult for Victorians to ignore. A newly awakened sympathy for suffering, from which arose a desire for change, was the result.

Emily, Charlotte, and Anne Brontë not only address – both directly and indirectly – these societal shifts in how animals and animality, and humans and humanity, were



viewed, they were also influential on the very society they wrote about. The novel form functioned and functions as both a social commentary and a reflection on society.

Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, with all of its violence, cruelty, and abuse, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, with its conscientious concern with justice and kindness, and Anne's *Agnes Grey*, with its moralistic encouragement of empathy and consideration, all show the shifts in how suffering and cruelty are viewed, and how other-than-human animals are treated by humans. The Brontës' concern with what it is to be human, and what it is to be humane, is at the heart of each of these novels. Novels which reflect the newly awakened concerns of many Victorians, and suggest new ways of looking at the world.

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