

Birds of Becoming and Belonging: Negotiations of Control and Freedom in *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*

By Lam See Jing Chloe

School of English; Department of Fine Arts

In tracing Pip and Jane's quests for becoming and belonging, *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre* flesh out a search for equilibrium between freedom and control by evoking the imagery and associations of birds as creatures that embody both. These characters' growths are in their beginnings, courses, turns, and returns pursuits of balance concerning the execution of self-control against overindulgence in freedom, and struggles for liberation from others' control. Beginning in a state of starvation—lack of freedom and control—this plays out most explicitly in the respective peripeteia of each novel: Pip's sudden gain and loss of wealth in association to becoming a gentleman, and Jane's unexpected reversal of identity from bride to potential mistress. While Lowood and London are settings primarily associated with control, and Thornfield and the village, of freedom, both novels introduce a third locale near the end where the protagonists attempt to make manifest their grasp of balance. This is the Orient for Pip, and Ferndean, Jane. Ultimately, just as "bird" connotes the young and yet-to-be matured,¹ these texts can be evaluated as bildungsroman whose plots exemplify the simultaneous need for restraint and the anxiety of constraint that in turn reflect the novel as a mode of structured expression itself.

Narrated by Pip, the "helpless subject and powerful agent of the text" (Jordan 163), *Great Expectations* recounts the struggles between perceptions of chains versus freedom through the associations of birds. Pip's identity perpetually wavers between that of a gentleman's and that of a guilty criminal's, just as he ambivalently connects with yet distances from his surrogate fathers, Joe and Magwitch. Similarly, his initial ideas of "freedom" and "control" also alter in the course of his discoveries and disillusionments.

The protagonist's being "bound apprentice to Joe" (Dickens 103), for instance, is described as a hefty "weight" (Dickens 106). This is bondage "in two respects, both to the job and to the rules governing his in-

dentures" (Newey 181). That Pip is mistakenly given a print that features "a malevolent young man lifted up with a perfect sausage-shop of fetters" (Dickens 106) upon his apprenticeship further associates the forge with imprisonment.

What he perceives as liberation from the bounds of his apprenticeship, however, only shows to be a self-willed departure from a true source of fulfillment, prompted by little but romantic dreams. This first reversal in status is, in short, freedom from the forge into a more dominant form of control under legal contract to his benefactor.

By agreeing to his great expectations, Pip unknowingly signs himself into constant connection with what Orlick refers to as "birds from the cages" (Dickens 118)—escaped prisoners. Pip's material indulgence in spending "freely" (Dickens 289) is, in this sense, directly enabled by his being chained in association with Magwitch and his identity. "All I've got ain't mine, it's yourn," Magwitch tells Pip (Dickens 331), and he is right.

The light-heartedness of bird's song (Dickens 159) suggesting freedom upon Pip's departure from the village is here transformed into Magwitch's self-reference as "an old bird [that] . . . has dared all manner of traps since he was fledged" (332). Reality for the benefactor is not "a song or a story-book" but a repeated series of being "done everything to" (Dickens 345); if there is melody at all, it seems only to be the monotonous refrain of "in jail and out of jail" (Dickens 345). Magwitch, in this way, gives Pip not only the prestige and material freedom of a gentleman, but also the "trappings" of his identity (Stone 284).

Pip, no longer able to "fly from" (Dickens 337) Magwitch, feels instead "pursued by the creature who had made [him]" (Dickens 337), becoming prey to what first appears as freedom. Magwitch's "attachment" to Pip (Dickens 431) chains him, while Pip himself is financially dependent on the former.

On the contrary, the real source of freedom that Pip realizes too late is revealed to be his relationship with Joe. Joe's care-taking during Pip's convalescence, in fact, mirrors the reconciliation of their relationship. It is only at this point that birds' song is mentioned again (Dickens 472).

The balance that Pip learns, already foregrounded by Joe, is realized in the space afforded by a third locale, that of the East. In describing Wopsle's costume, Joe recounts that his mourning hat is "unfortunately so small as that the weight of the black feathers brings it off" (Dickens 220). A sign of prestige and wealth, the feathers prove to be too hefty in weight, off-balancing its very carrier, not unlike Pip with his preoccupation with literal and figurative expectations.

Balance, then, is important, but Pip can no longer manifest it in the deserted forge, nor in London. Selling all that he had and beginning anew (Dickens 484), Pip strikes a point of equilibrium between not being "in a grand way of business, but having . . . a good name, and working for our profits" (Dickens 485). He arrives at the conclusion that this means "doing very well" (Dickens 485). The East here thus becomes a space in which the protagonist, having learned the village as freedom and the city as control, can start afresh. The success of Pip's balance, much like the indistinct idea of "the East," is taken on trust of his maturation.

A similar tug between control and freedom flows through Jane's search for belonging, especially with the figure of Rochester. What appears to be Jane's fulfillment in finding belonging—being wedded to Rochester as mistress of Thornfield—unveils as a potential inauguration instead into a flip identity: that of illegitimate mistress in an extramarital affair. Jane's want for liberty against being netted is, in this sense, pitched against her as strong desire to find a home; her recurring struggle is the decision to flock with unbounded want or to exercise, instead, self-control.

Jane's search for affinity is foregrounded as she describes a painted "bird of paradise, nestling in a wreath of convolvuli and rosebuds" (Brontë 25) and, later, her drawing of "an elf sitting in a hedge-sparrow's nest, under a wreath of hawthorn-bloom" (Brontë 268). "A discord in Gateshead Hall" (Brontë 19), Jane is metaphorically unable to find a nest in Lowood either. In fact, Rochester observes that "the Lowood constraint still clings to you somewhat" (Brontë 162), constricting and stifling her expressions. Jane fears to "to smile too gaily, speak too freely, or move too quickly," and is described as a caged, "curious sort of bird . . . a vivid, restless, resolute captive that would soar cloud-high" if freed (Brontë 162).²

Gradually, Jane learns “to be natural” (Brontë 162) with Rochester. Her attempt “to break out of the cage,” however, is echoed with images “of confiding places and would-be jailers that [she] has to deal with” beyond Rochester (Lutwack 213). Like Pip’s departure from the village, her proposal scene appears as a fairy-tale episode. She recounts the setting as “a band of Italian days had come from the South, like a flock of glorious passenger birds, and lighted to rest them on the cliffs of Albion” (Brontë 286). The site of Rochester’s proposal is, in fact, an Eden (Brontë 286), a liminal space between paradise and fall linked together by temptation.

Jane’s negotiation between desire and rationality here is described by Rochester as he tells her not to “struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation” (Brontë 293). Jane, regaining control, asserts however “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me” (Brontë 293). Her humanity, it seems, is made manifest in her self-distancing from a netted bird and her control over her own liberty: “I am a free human being with an independent will which I now exert to leave you” (Brontë 293).

Just as Pip imagines his expectations in association with his “fairy godmother” (Dickens 158) instead of Magwitch, Jane’s belief that she has found true belonging with Rochester is proved reversed upon the realization of Bertha’s identity. What appears to be secure belonging with Rochester at this stage reveals as illusionary as Pip’s expectations with Estella. This is foreshadowed in Jane’s surveying of the wrecked chestnut tree before her wedding day, as she muses that it will “never more see birds making nests and singing idylls in your boughs; the time and pleasure and love is over with you” (Brontë 319).

Avian imagery reemerges following the interrupted wedding, as Rochester again refers to Jane as “the resolute, wild, free thing looking out” from its cage (Brontë 366). The notion of Jane as bird and home as nest is furthered with Bertha who “attempts to destroy the ‘half-built nest’ Jane and Rochester are constructing, first by lighting Rochester’s bed on fire, then by tearing apart Jane’s bridal veil, and most climactically, by destroying Thornfield Hall itself after Rochester’s failed attempt at bigamy” (Taylor 8).

Escaping from the stifling control of Lowood and with Thornfield, the site of passion, literally burnt down by fire, Rochester and Jane reunite at Ferndean. It is in this humble place that Jane is able to finally

fulfill the Eden-like proposal as she states that she is “ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh” (Brontë 519). Here, she is no longer the lonely bird in Bewick’s *History of British Birds* (Brontë 10), the cormorant laced with gold and gems (Brontë 147), or “the resolute, wild, free thing” (Brontë 366), but a “skylark” come home (Brontë 506).

The bird, significant as a trope in romantic literature (Lutwack xii), thus proves resilient in the protagonists’ negotiations of metaphorical flight against caging as well. The issuing of “balance” as an aim (Tanner 96) in the negotiation between “the virtues of ‘freedom’ opposing themselves to the necessities of ‘control’” (Tanner 98) plays out and is facilitated by the imagery of birds in both novels, especially in their plot reversals. Although *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre* are texts that “concentrate on everything within the individual . . . which conspires to negate or transcend boundaries,” they also maintain the “existence of, and need for, boundaries” (Tanner 138). While an excess of either control or freedom proves harmful, both Pip and Jane strive to strike a feasible balance between the two where each is in check of the other. This struggle in turn consolidates the protagonists’ growths in character, whether fulfilled in their conclusions or not. Their occupation of a third locale middling the extremes of control and freedom speaks to this fulfillment, just as the literary space afforded by their narratives structure for them an expression that embodies restraint and liberty as well.

Notes

1. The OED states that “bird” in Old English is “the general name for the young of the feathered tribes; a young bird; a chicken, eaglet, etc.; a nestling.”

Reference entry from the following source: "bird, n." OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. 8 December 2013 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/19327?rskey=hGNN2n&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

2. In relation to this, Lutwack notes that since flight is commonly associated with the notions of freedom and transcendence, “the caging of birds was particularly offensive” to romantic sensibilities (153).

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[About the author]

Having completed her Bachelor's degree in English Studies and Fine Arts at HKU, Chloe has recently began her postgraduate career at King's College London. She enjoys most literature (but wishes she were better at reading poetry), and her research interests lie particularly in works of the late 19th-early 20th centuries. In her free time, Chloe busies herself with illustration and creative writing. On top of fruitfully completing her MA, it is a personal goal of hers to visit as many museums as possible during her year overseas. She also finds it amusingly awkward to write in the third person.