

Birds and Cages in *Bleak House*
By Emma Brodey

In reading Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, one cannot help but notice the enormous significance of birds. The word 'bird' alone appears 72 times in *Bleak House*, and this large number is no coincidence. Miss Flite's mysteriously named birds play a large role in the plot as thought-provoking symbols. Ten of the major characters in *Bleak House* are at some point described as birds, and these descriptions are remarkably diverse. Bird imagery is not uniform in the novel, but rather ranges in connotation from sweet and tame to ruthless and predatory. It is not gendered either, as five of the bird characters are women, and five are men. Finally, Esther, Boythorne, and Miss Flite all own birds at some point in the novel. Dickens uses birds and their cages, both real and metaphorical, to expose the true nature and relationships among his characters, to reveal his culture's various forms of financial injustice, and to criticize society's lack of care for those who are lonely or caged.

In *Bleak House*, real birds offer comfort and family to those whom society has forgotten. Miss Flite's birds are kept in real cages; however, to Miss Flite, these cages symbolize her own cage: Chancery. She gives her birds a very interesting list of names: "Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach" (*Bleak House*, 235). These names may symbolize her own progression towards madness. In the beginning she is full of Hope and Youth.¹ Later she becomes more desperate, choosing names like Waste, Want, and Ruin. Even later she chooses names like Wigs and Jargon, becoming more and more obsessed with Chancery. In her final two names, Gammon and Spinach, Miss Flite demonstrates that she has become, as she herself puts it, "A little – M –, you know" (*Bleak House*, 72). Miss Flite has no family, and her birds' names are her only outlet for

¹ Miss Flite herself describes this stage. "I was a ward myself. I was not mad at the time ... I had youth, and hope. I believe, beauty. It matters very little now. Neither of the three served, or saved me" (*Bleak House*, 47).

expressing her emotion. She is truly lonely, suffering in the unjust cage of Chancery.

Esther's bird in the beginning of the novel is also a family for her. Esther has been abused and neglected in her aunt's home, and she takes only the bird when she leaves her aunt's home for school. This action comes after she buries her doll, a symbol of leaving behind her childhood. Esther has received little love from her aunt or anyone else in society, and she needs this bird as something to love. Esther has so little control over her own life that she needs to take care of something else, a role that both the caged little bird and eventually Ada fulfill. We never know a great deal about the bird, whether it is caged willingly, or even what becomes of it. But for a while at least, this bird stands in as a family for an abused Esther.

In contrast to Miss Flite's birds, trapped in cages until "Judgment should be given" (*Bleak House*, 73), Boythorne's little canary is the only real pet bird who is not caged at all. In *Bleak House*, Boythorne's bird serves as a symbol for "voluntary captivity" (Powell). The bird is "so tame that ... after taking a gentle flight round the room, [it] alighted on his master's head" (*Bleak House*, 143). The bird is Boythorne's pride and joy, as well as his family. Boythorne himself says, "I have left an annuity for his sole support, in case he should outlive me ... And his father before him was one of the most astonishing birds that ever lived" (*Bleak House*, 143). Boythorne is another character without a family. The little canary's family through the generations takes the place of Boythorne's own absent one, to the point of receiving an inheritance from his owner. The bird can leave Boythorne any time it wants to, but it does not and will not. Perhaps the bird is also like Boythorne, exceedingly loyal and true.

It is not just owners of birds who have their psychology revealed through birds. Among the ten major characters described as birds, three categories emerge. Some of them are caged birds, such as Ada, Esther, Lady Dedlock, George, and Miss Flite. Some are predatory birds, such as Mr. Smallweed, Tulkinghorn, and the Dedlock guests. Some are also scavengers, like Volumnia and Mr. Skimpole.

When Ada and Esther first explore Bleak House, they are enchanted. “It was one of those delightfully irregular houses . . . you lost yourself in passages, with mangles in them, and three cornered tables, and a native Hindu chair, which was also a sofa, a box, and a bedstead, and looked in every form something between a bamboo skeleton and a great bird-cage, and had been brought from India nobody knew by whom or when” (*Bleak House*, 85-86). This enormous skeleton or bird-cage seems an ominous symbol to appear during our first introduction to Bleak House, likening it itself to a cage. Then Esther and Ada’s sitting room is introduced. “Our sitting room was green and had framed and glazed upon the walls numbers of surprising and surprised birds, staring out of pictures” (*Bleak House*, 86). These birds are in frames, a kind of cage for paintings. They do not seem happy about it, but instead are “surprising and surprised” (*Bleak House*, 86). These birds are like Ada and Esther, trapped in the cage of Bleak House. Though it is a pleasant and protective cage, it is a cage all the same.

Lady Dedlock is less happy in her cage, trapped and caged by society and her own secret past. She is referred to as a “bird of passage” (*Bleak House*, 642), constantly forced to let go of the things she loves, (namely Esther and Esther’s father). She has accumulated many secrets, but cannot reveal them for fear of losing her own and her husband’s social status. She is afraid to make the fall from the “top of the fashionable tree” (*Bleak House*, 22) to the dark ground far below. She must constantly live a lie, and is forced to deny her own daughter. This societal cage is a terrible one – one that ultimately destroys her.

When George was a child, he worried his mother by “setting birds to draw their own water with the least possible amount of labor. So assisting them with artful contrivance of hydraulic pressure that a thirsty canary had only, in a literal sense, to put his shoulder to the wheel and the job was done” (*Bleak House*, 107). This action proves George’s kindness at a young age, and identifies him as a

protector of birds; however, George resides in a cage of shame over his past, and needless poverty. George would conceivably be happy with Phil and his shooting gallery, but for this poverty that his pride forbids him to shed. Because of this cage he is forced to give up his beloved gallery, and do things that he believes are wrong – for example, giving his captain’s letter to Mr. Tulkinghorn. This kind of fall is horrifying for a proud character like George. George’s depiction as a protector of birds shows us his basic good nature.

Metaphorical predatory birds like Mr. Smallweed and Mr. Tulkinghorn also play a large role in Dickens’s ornithological descriptions. Smallweed is, at different times, called an “ugly old bird of the crow species” (*Bleak House*, 425) and a “hideous bird of prey” (*Bleak House*, 531). Mr. Smallweed is predatory with regard to his family and everyone else, and this description only serves to solidify this image. Although Mr. Tulkinghorn is not specifically described as a predatory bird, he is described as a “dingy London bird” (*Bleak House*, 661). He arrives and leaves Chesney Wold almost mysteriously, as if he could fly there and back. Tulkinghorn is jealous of the Dedlocks’ social status, and is maliciously trying to find Lady Dedlock’s secret, even though it is not something Sir Dedlock wants to hear. Dickens’s narrator uses the metaphor of birds to show the true nature of Tulkinghorn and Smallweed.

Although Mr. Vholes and the Dedlock guests are not assigned specific birds, Dickens’s narrator does make them sound very predatory. Mr. Vholes is a “bird of ill omen” (*Bleak House*, 696), especially for Richard. Mr. Vholes is a predatory bird, preying off the well-intentioned Richard. Vholes helps draw Richard into Chancery for his own monetary gain. Richard eventually dies because of his obsession, and Mr. Vholes is primarily to blame for it. When the Dedlock guests are at Chesney Wold, they are described as “birds of night who roost when the sun is high and are wide awake and keen for prey when the stars shine out” (*Bleak House*, 417). The guests seem almost comical in the daytime; however, we learn that when no one is looking they can be dangerous, and may cause harm.

Volumnia and Mr. Skimpole both fit the category of scavenger birds. Volumnia, “a young lady (of sixty)” (*Bleak House*, 447), inspects Sir Leicester’s papers “like a bird, taking a short peck at this document, and hopping about from table to table with her glass at her eye in an inquisitive and restless manner” (*Bleak House*, 857). She also wears “an obsolete pearl necklace like a rosary of little bird’s-eggs” (*Bleak House*, 447). This narration confirms her as a kind of scavenger, like a bird that takes eggs from the nest of another bird. She seems eager to be the first to feast on the death of Sir Leicester.

Mr. Skimpole refers to himself as a songbird. In his own words, “They pluck his feathers now and then and clip his wings, but he sings, he sings” (*Bleak House*, 673). This image of his own making paints him as a protagonist with all the world against him. As *Bleak House* progresses, however, Dickens makes it clear to us that Mr. Skimpole is not a songbird. He constantly draws as much money as he can from Mr. Jarndyce, and even Esther and Richard. He takes things without paying for them, and when confronted he simply replies that he cannot be held responsible for them. Skimpole may think he is a songbird, but Dickens makes it clear that he is a scavenger of the most despicable kind.

Throughout *Bleak House*, birds and cages reveal neglect, isolation, injustice, and hidden evil in Victorian society. What makes the ending of *Bleak House* so very powerful, however, is the release of those birds and the opening of some of those cages. Miss Flite’s birds are set free when the day of judgment comes, and the cage of Chancery is opened for her and for Richard. Though her ending is tragic, Lady Dedlock passes into another world where she can be free and without secrets, like the “bird of passage” she is. George finds his happiness and freedom in Chesney Wold, returning to his maternal nest. Without this liberating ending, *Bleak House* would be a sad book with a sad ending. Society doesn't take care of its victims, and injustice often does prevail: this is what Dickens is critiquing. By suggesting a happy ending, revealed by winged messengers both real and metaphorical,

the book gains a more constructive message: what may be bad now should be and can be changed for the better.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Powell, Neil. "Mr Boythorne's Canary." *PN* 32.4 (n.d.): n. pag. May 2006. Web. 14 Mar. 2013.