**Bird Imagery in Jane Eyre**

Bronte uses birds in several ways:

1. birds almost always appear in landscape descriptions of which I have not referenced much;
2. characterization is intensified in bird images
3. birds are used as a symbol of happiness-love-hope for example, in the portrayal of Jane’s relationship with Edward Fairfax Rochester.

Consider how the following quotations do the above? Are they thematic?

**Gateshead**

I returned to my book—Bewick’s History of British Birds: the letterpress thereof I cared little for, generally speaking; and yet there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank. They were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of ‘the solitary rocks and promontories’ by them only inhabited; of the coast of Norway, studded with isles from its southern extremity, the Lindeness, or Naze, to the North Cape— ‘Where the Northern Ocean, in vast whirls, Boils round the naked, melancholy isles Of farthest Thule; and the Atlantic surge Pours in among the stormy Hebrides.’

Bessie had been down into the kitchen, and she brought up with her a tart on a certain brightly painted china plate, whose bird of paradise, nestling in a wreath of convolvuli and rosebuds, had been wont to stir in me a most enthusiastic sense of admiration; and which plate I had often petitioned to be allowed to take in my hand in order to examine it more closely, but had always hitherto been deemed unworthy of such a privilege....This precious vessel was now placed on my knee, and I was cordially invited to eat the circlet of delicate pastry upon it. Vain favour! coming, like most other favours long deferred and often wished for, too late! I could not eat the tart; and the plumage of the bird, the tints of the flowers, seemed strangely faded: I put both plate and tart away. Bessie asked if I would have a book: the word BOOK acted as a transient stimulus, and I begged her to fetch Gulliver’s Travels from the library. This book I had again and again perused with delight.

**Thornfield**

All these relics gave to the third storey of Thornfield Hall the aspect of a home of the past: a shrine of memory. I liked the hush, the gloom, the quaintness of these retreats in the day; but I by no means coveted a night’s repose on one of those wide and heavy beds: shut in, some of them, with doors of oak; shaded, others, with wrought old English hangings crusted with thick work, portraying effigies of strange flowers, and stranger birds, and strangest human beings,— all which would have looked strange, indeed, by the pallid gleam of moonlight. ‘Do the servants sleep in these rooms?’ I asked. ‘No; they occupy a range of smaller apartments to the back; no one ever sleeps here: one would almost say that, if there were a ghost at Thornfield Hall, this would be its haunt.’ ‘So I think: you have no ghost, then?’ ‘None that I ever heard of,’ returned Mrs. Fairfax

‘If you did, it would be in such a grave, quiet manner, I should mistake it for sense. Do you never laugh, Miss Eyre? Don’t trouble yourself to answer—I see you laugh rarely; but you can laugh very merrily: believe me, you are not naturally austere, any more than I am naturally vicious. The Lowood constraint still clings to you somewhat; controlling your features, muffling your voice, and restricting your limbs; and you fear in the presence of a man and a brother— or father, or master, or what you will—to smile too gaily, 212 Jane Eyre speak too freely, or move too quickly: but, in time, I think you will learn to be natural with me, as I find it impossible to be conventional with you; and then your looks and movements will have more vivacity and variety than they dare offer now. 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. You are still bent on going?’

There were but eight; yet, somehow, as they flocked in, they gave the impression of a much larger number. Some of them were very tall; many were dressed in white; and all had a sweeping amplitude of array that seemed to magnify their persons as a mist magnifies the moon. I rose and curtseyed to them: one or two bent their heads in return, the others only stared at me. They dispersed about the room, reminding me, by the lightness and buoyancy of their movements, of a flock of white plumy birds. Some of them threw themselves in half reclining positions on the sofas and ottomans: some bent 260 Jane Eyre over the tables and examined the flowers and books: the rest gathered in a group round the fire: all talked in a low but clear tone which seemed habitual to them.

Then my own thoughts worried me. What crime was this that lived incarnate in this sequestered mansion, and could neither be expelled nor subdued by the owner?—what mystery, that broke out now in fire and now in blood, at the deadest hours of night? What creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman’s face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?

In another moment I was within that apartment. There was every article of furniture looking just as it did on the morning I was first introduced to Mr. Brocklehurst: the very rug he had stood upon still covered the hearth. Glancing at the bookcases, I thought I could distinguish the two volumes of Bewick’s British Birds occupying their old place on the third shelf, and Gulliver’s Travels and the Arabian Nights ranged just above. The inanimate objects were not changed; but the living things had altered past recognition.

I knew there would be pleasure in meeting my master again, even though broken by the fear that he was so soon to cease to be my master, and by the knowledge that I was nothing to him: but there was ever in Mr. Rochester (so at least I thought) such a wealth of the power of communicating happiness, that to taste but of the crumbs he scattered to stray and stranger birds like me, was to feast genially. His last words were balm: they seemed to imply that it imported something to him whether I forgot him or not. And he had spoken of Thornfield as my home—would that it were my home!

‘As we are!’ repeated Mr. Rochester—‘so,’ he added, enclosing me in his arms. Gathering me to his breast, pressing his lips on my lips: ‘so, Jane!’ ‘Yes, so, sir,’ I rejoined: ‘and yet not so; for you are a married man—or as good as a married man, and wed to one inferior to you—to one with whom you have no sympathy— whom I do not believe you truly love; for I have seen and heard you sneer at her. I would scorn such a union: therefore I am better than you—let me go!’ ‘Where, Jane? To Ireland?’ ‘Yes—to Ireland. I have spoken my mind, and can go anywhere now.’ ‘Jane, be still; don’t struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation.’ ‘I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.’ Another effort set me at liberty, and I stood erect before him.

The rooks cawed, and blither birds sang; but nothing was so merry or so musical as my own rejoicing heart

‘Well, sir?’ ‘When you are inquisitive, Jane, you always make me smile. You open your eyes like an eager bird, and make every now and then a restless movement, as if answers in speech did not flow fast enough for you, and you wanted to read the tablet of one’s heart. But before I go on, tell me what you mean by your ‘Well, sir?’ It is a small phrase very frequent with you; and which many a time has drawn me on and on through interminable talk: I don’t very well know why.’

**Between Thornfield and Moorhouse, the home of the Rivers family**

It was a barbed arrow-head in my breast; it tore me when I tried to extract it; it sickened me when remembrance thrust it farther in. Birds began singing in brake and copse: birds were faithful to their mates; birds were emblems of love. What was I? In the midst of my pain of heart and frantic effort of principle, I abhorred myself. I had no solace from self- approbation: none even from self respect. I had injured—wounded— left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes. Still I could not turn, nor retrace one step. God must have led me on. As to my own will or conscience, impassioned grief had trampled one and stifled the other. I was weeping wildly as I walked along my solitary way: fast, fast I went like one delirious.

My rest might have been blissful enough, only a sad heart broke it. It plained of its gaping wounds, its inward bleeding, its riven chords. It trembled for Mr. Rochester and his doom; it bemoaned him with bitter pity; it demanded him with ceaseless longing; and, impotent as a bird with both wings broken, it still quivered its shattered pinions in vain attempts to seek him

**Moorhouse**

‘Indeed you SHALL stay here,’ said Diana, putting her white hand on my head. ‘You SHALL,’ repeated Mary, in the tone of undemonstrative sincerity which seemed natural to her. ‘My sisters, you see, have a pleasure in keeping you,’ said Mr. St. John, ‘as they would have a pleasure in keeping and cherishing a half-frozen bird, some wintry wind might have driven through their casement.

The birds were singing their last strains— ‘The air was mild, the dew was balm.’ While I looked, I thought myself happy, and was surprised to find myself ere long weeping—and why? For the doom which had reft me from adhesion to my master: for him I was no more to see; for the desperate grief and fatal fury—consequences of my departure—which might now, perhaps, be dragging him from the path of right, too far to leave hope of ultimate restoration thither.

**Back to Thornfield**

His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour as ever: his port was still erect, his heir was still raven black; nor were his features altered or sunk: not in one year’s space, by any sorrow, could his athletic strength be quelled or his vigorous prime blighted. But in his countenance I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding—that reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson.