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Birdwatching: A Closer Look at the Imagery of Chopin and Lee

All birds tweet or chirp, but a mockingbird collects over 200 unique songs throughout its life and beautifully sings them for everyone to enjoy (Oldham). Not surprisingly, this can inspire some interesting symbolism. Kate Chopin is known for her use of bird imagery in *The Awakening*. The main character, Edna Pontellier, as well as a few other characters, are associated with several different birds throughout the novel. These associations are important in conveying the novel's theme of flying against society's ideals. I think another author to note who uses the image of a bird to convey a significant idea is Harper Lee. In Lee's work, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the title itself gives readers a picture of a bird. I believe that looking at the birds in *The Awakening* is a way to read important ideas in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

One idea associated with birds is a cage. Cages are needed to confine the bird so that it does not fly around and annoy others or hurt itself. In *The Awakening*, Chopin conveys the idea that marriage and society is the cage, and woman is the bird trapped inside (Elz 14). Marriage keeps Edna tied down and "safe" from her own actions. A bird in a cage is meant to be gazed upon and admired for its beauty. This can be seen in Edna's brief description of Madame Ratignolle: "She was dressed in pure white, with a fluffiness of ruffles that became her. The draperies and fluttering things which she wore suited her rich, luxuriant beauty as a greater severity of line could not have done" (Chopin 572). By describing Madame Ratignolle as white, fluffy, ruffled, and fluttering, Chopin gives readers a picture of a fine-feathered fowl. In A

Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft states, “Confined then in cages like the feathered race, they [women] have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch” (qtd. in Elz 14). Madame Ratignolle’s—and Edna’s—position as a married woman of a high class has left her with nothing to do but make herself look nice, care for her children, compliment her husband, and stay within the confines of society’s cage.

Another example Chopin gives is at one of the dinner parties. A little girl dances for the guests, and “her little neck and arms were bare, and her hair, artificially crimped, stood out like fluffy black plumes over her head. Her poses were full of grace” (Chopin 580). Again, with words like *fluffy*, *black*, and *plumes*, readers see the image of a bird, and she is admired for her graceful dance like a bird for its sweet song or fluttering wings. But however great the admiration, it cannot compare to the greatness of freedom. Chopin shows that women need freedom with the beginning scene of the parrot and mockingbird continuously speaking and singing. It is easy to see that “the caged birds are not mere items to admire when one wants and to dismiss when one is either bored with them or wants silence; instead, they are a continuing presence” and deserve to be heard (Elz 15).

Something interesting to note is that in nature, it is mainly the *male* bird that is full of colorful feathers. The females are the ones with the dull colors. I think this raises the question, “Does society have everything backwards?” The birds do what God made them to do, and things go smoothly and happily. This is not the case for humans, but we struggle daily with being independent of God. Perhaps we should follow the birds’ example.



Figure 1. Eastern Male Bluebird (Powell, Hugh)

© Debbie McKenzie , Alabama, September 2008



Figure 2. Eastern Female Bluebird (Powell, Hugh)

© Debbie McKenzie , Alabama, September 2008

Edna attempts this. She leaves the house she shares with Léonce and moves herself and her possessions to a smaller one. Her servant calls her new residence a pigeon house “because it’s so small and looks like a pigeon house” (Chopin 628). Edna thinks she is trading her cage and bright feathers for freedom and simplicity. However, pigeon houses are “for the domesticated birds kept for show or sport. The breeds kept by these fashionable hobbyists were elegantly colored, little resembling the drab street pigeon” (qtd. in Elz 22). So, even when trying to follow nature’s example, Edna cannot escape how society domesticates and displays her.



Figure 3. Rock (Street) Pigeon (Powell, Hugh)

© Gregg Lee, Somervell Co., Texas, July 2006



Figure 4. English Trumpeter (Show) Pigeon (Wikipedia)

Lee shows us her similar picture of society's cage through the tired old town of Maycomb County, AL. For Lee, Maycomb itself is the cage—there are strict rules for each class and race and boundaries that should not be crossed. Jem lays it all out for Scout: “There’s four kinds of folks in the world. There’s the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there’s the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the Negroes” (Lee 207). It is imperative to this Maycomb society that no one rattle the cage door.

However, Scout does exactly that when she replies, “Naw, Jem, I think there’s just one kind of folks. Folks” (Lee 207). For Scout, there are no lines separating people, so there is no cage.

In Maycomb, there is also the idea that women should not be listened to, and should only do what society has laid out for them. Atticus explains to Jem and Scout that Miss Maudie cannot serve on the jury because she is a woman. Scout says indignantly, “You mean women in Alabama can’t—?” (Lee 202). And Atticus replies, “I do. I guess it’s to protect our frail ladies from sordid cases like Tom’s. Besides, I doubt if we’d ever get a complete case tried—the ladies’d be interrupting to ask questions” (Lee 202). This shows that women in Maycomb are seen as delicate and in need of protection, so the cage is only as large as their home. This small space also keeps men from having to listen to their chirps.

Lee perfectly illustrates how society only admires women with the character of Aunt Alexandra: “She was not fat, but solid, and she chose protective garments that drew up her bosom to giddy heights, pinched in her waist, flared out her rear, and managed to suggest that Aunt Alexandra’s was once an hour-glass figure” (120). Alexandra is staying inside society’s cage by devoting her time to looking the way a woman of her position, a Finch, is supposed to look. According to the Cronell Lab of Ornithology, finches are small birds with fairly large beaks. The Finch name may not seem important to most, but Aunt Alexandra uses her big beak to talk-up the family name. Finches are also gregarious birds (Powell). This means they are “given to association with others of the same species” (OED). Just as finches tend to only associate with other finches, Aunt Alexandra only associates with people of her social status. She wants Jem and Scout to stay away from the trash of Maycomb. When used to describe a person, gregarious means “inclined to associate with others, fond of company” (OED). Aunt Alexandra is a social Finch. She has a missionary circle full of chirpy and colorful ladies: “The ladies were

cool in fragile pastel prints: most of them were heavily powdered but unrouged; the only lipstick in the room was Tangee Natural. Cutex Natural sparkled on their fingernails, but some of the younger ladies wore Rose. They smelled heavenly” (Lee 209). Aunt Alexandra tries to get Scout to act like a Finch, too, but Scout resists. She refuses to make herself admirable by dressing in ruffles and finery—she continues to rattle the cage.



*Figure 5. Female and Male House Finch
(Powell, Hugh)
© Richard Lee, September 2008*

It takes strength to break free from entrapment. Chopin makes this clear through Madame Reisz’s advice to Edna: “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (626). Here, Chopin directly compares Edna with a bird—a bird trying to leave its cage and a woman trying to lead her own life. I think she is also comparing Madame Reisz to a bird. I believe it is likely that Madame Riesz went through everything Edna is currently experiencing. That is why she knows Edna needs to be strong if she is going to completely shatter society’s image of herself and create her own, to leave her husband and become the woman she is in her heart. And Madame Riesz knows just how much strength it will take

because she had enough to burst through the cage, fly against the wind, and make it to the perch of independence. However, Edna does not have wings this strong and is “injured in her soul—her essence” (Elz 19). Her husband injures her by listening to her song only when he feels like it. Robert injures her by refusing to leave the cage with her. Even her children make up a bar of the cage by preventing her from living the life she wants. Like the bird she sees with the broken wing “beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water,” Edna succumbs to the wounds her society has inflicted.

Unlike Edna, Atticus Finch has the strength of Madame Reisz. He flies against Southern society by defending a black man. He chooses to listen to the words of Tom Robinson, a Negro, over those of the white woman, Mayella Ewell. This shakes Maycomb and its ideas as Atticus breaks free from the cage and tells the jury, “I am confident that you gentlemen will review without passion the evidence you have heard, come to a decision, and restore this defendant to his family. In the name of God, do your duty” (Lee 188-89). With complete confidence in himself and his defendant, Atticus asks the people of Maycomb to ignore racial and societal lines and listen to the truth.

Following Atticus’ lead is Tom Robinson. He, like Edna, *almost* has strong wings. He crosses a set boundary by saying he feels sorry for a white woman and telling the truth about Mayella’s advances. But breaking the cage breaks his wing: ““They shot him [Tom],” said Atticus. ‘He was running. It was during their exercise period. They said he just broke into a blind raving charge at the fence and started climbing over’” (Lee 215). This is exactly how “Edna uses her strong, yet flawed, wings to remove herself from the world that cannot comprehend her” (Elz 25). Tom is not able to continue his fight against society—the damage is too much. No one believes in him, so he cannot find it within himself to keep hoping and speaking the truth.



Figure 6. Robin

Charleston Road Marsh, Mountain View, California
January 2006 © Peter LaTourrette

Tom Robinson sings the song of the Robin. All he does is show kindness to Mayella, and that is the truth he proclaims. T. Martin Trippe writes about the Robin that “if you would fully appreciate his song, you must listen to his matinee” (402). Maycomb did not appreciate Tom’s song. His truth went against everything that made up the society’s cage, so they refused to listen.

This introduces the implications of killing Tom Robinson who, along with many other characters in both

novels, is seen in the imagery of a mockingbird and its

songs of empathy, innocence, and beauty. Lee writes:

“...remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.’ That

was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it. ‘Your father’s right,’ she said. ‘Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy...they don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird’” (86).

First, it is a sin not to empathize with people. Empathy is defined as “the power of projecting one’s personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation” (qtd. in Pryal 176). In *The Awakening*, Edna is the object of contemplation, but the people around her do not attempt to contemplate her. She cannot connect with anyone because they refuse to see things from her—a woman desperately searching for her own life—perspective. Similarly, Tom cannot connect with the white people of Maycomb because they are not colorblind. They see his skin and use its color to justify refusing empathy. Scout tries to use the oddness of an outcast to avoid

empathy with Boo Radley. However, she follows Atticus' advice to understand another by climbing into his skin and walking around in it (Lee 32). If everyone followed this advice, maybe Tom and Edna would still be alive at the end of the books.

Second, it is a sin to kill innocence. When Edna is introduced to the community of Grand Isle, Louisiana she is completely innocent to the inner workings of this society. Madame Ratignolle even tells Robert, "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (Chopin 576). Edna does take Robert seriously, though, and is punished by the harsh complexities of the society she does not fully understand. When Tom Robinson innocently shows compassion for Mayella, he is punished by the severe racism of the South. He is found guilty of daring to feel pity for a white woman.

Scout and Jem are attacked and then rescued by Boo Radley. Scout walks with Boo back to his house, and she narrates, "Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough" (Lee 253-54). Scout now sees the tired town of Maycomb and herself from the point of view of a man she once feared. She understands Arthur's (Boo) quiet, innocent ways and his affection for her and Jem. And by understanding these things, she gains the wisdom to see that it would be a sin to involve him, a person guilty only of compassion, in the death of Bob Ewell.

Finally, it is a sin to kill the beauty in the world. Mockingbirds sing many different songs for people to enjoy. Madame Reisz plays beautiful music on the piano. Edna creates stunning artwork and goes through the beautiful process of discovering herself. Tom lays down all defenses and proclaims the truth. Boo carefully carves the likenesses of Jem and Scout on two soap dolls and gives them many other gifts of friendship. Scout, Jem, and Dill perform plays and even write some of their own that show a child's understanding of the world around him. All of

this is what mockingbirds do. They are each collecting their songs and then singing their hearts out so the world can enjoy and know that they are a part of it.

By looking at the bird imagery in *The Awakening* with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we can see an important message: there are aspects of society that can act as an entrapment, and there are certain aspects of people that make them able to break free. We are given examples of those who fail and those who succeed. The comparison of these two novels illustrates the strength it takes to do this and what kind of person you have to be—you have to be a mockingbird.



Figure 7. Northern Mockingbird (Powell, Hugh)

© Bob Baker, Greene County, Virginia, July 2007

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