

Christie Leigh Harner. "Animal and Social Ecologies in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 48. 3 (2020): 577-599.

The significance of animal-human relations in literature by the Brontës has been well established by scholars of Victorian literary studies. While Anne Brontë has received less critical attention than her better-known sisters, critics have nevertheless acknowledged her masterful depictions of human and nonhuman animals in *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). In Christie Harner's article, "Animal and Social Ecologies in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*," she argues that Brontë's novel proposes a reading of species relations that are entangled and "weblike." Harner draws on scientific discourse to demonstrate the ways in which reading the novel through an ecological lens "offers a more valuable framework to analyze its complexities of human-animal interactions and economic structures" (578). Crucially, she reads species relations as ambiguous and unstable, inviting new ways of understanding animal-human agency and relationality that subvert and challenge hierarchal structures of being.

The essay's ecological framework serves as a departure from recent criticism on Brontë's novel by critics such as Sally Shuttleworth, Maggie Berg, Ivan Kreilkamp, and Hilary Newman. In contrast to their analyses of cross-species abjection of women, the lower classes, and animals, Harner's framework treats the novel's "ecosystem" as prismatic of the economic and socio-political concerns of 1840s England. In this way, Harner reads the novel alongside early Victorian scientific discourse to showcase the connection between the economy and ecology. The strength of Harner's argument is thus tied to her rigorous exploration of Victorian ecology, which formulates the first part of her essay. She makes the claim that Brontë's illustration of the "mesh" of species relations predates both the terms "ecology" and "ecosystem" as well as kinship claims made by Darwin in his pathbreaking *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Compelling, too, is her demonstration of the pervasiveness of web metaphors in a number of works across disciplines, noting figures as diverse as John Herschel, John Stuart Mill, and Robert Chambers, before entering into a more extended analysis of the "clashes between the Lyellian and Lamarckian renderings of natural history" (581). For Harner, "these arguments are irreconcilable, and yet, together, they capture the transitional period within which *Agnes Grey* is situated" (583). Brontë's use of scientific discourse, therefore, emphasizes how the actions of characters in the novel are premised on shifting interactions, which Harner parses through case studies of the Bloomfield and Murray "ecosystems."

Harner first traces the novel's entangled relations through Agnes's time as a governess at the Bloomfield house. In an environment for which she seems ill-suited, Agnes is placed in sharp contrast to the thriving Bloomfields. The family's success is due to their "corporeal dominance" which is "conflated with economic or social success" (584). This claim is explored with particular emphasis on the scene in which Agnes "upends the structures of power through her own exercise of corporeal might" when she uses a rock to crush a brood of baby birds that Tom Bloomfield had planned to torture (585). For Harner, this scene showcases Bloomfield as "an arena of shifting relations," thereby differentiating

her reading from critics who have read this scene strictly “for forms of oppression” (586; 585). She advances her argument in the third section of the essay by reading Agnes as an invasive species at the Murray estate “that alters the dynamic in an ecosystem, pointing to and playing with existing bonds within the web” (588). Characters in the novel consequently participate in a tug-of-war for power that is not solely contingent on gender, race, age, class, or size, but also on their abilities to adapt and negotiate their positions.

Harner’s essay is an insightful contribution to Victorian Literary Studies and the field of Literature and Science more broadly. With her rich analysis of *Agnes Grey*, Harner effectively increases the scope of the novel’s potential audience for interdisciplinary scholars and students alike. Moreover, by grounding her essay in early nineteenth-century scientific and ecological discourses, Harner takes a wide lens to the novel’s instances of oppression and marginalization in order to examine instead, their root causes: the interconnectedness and “entanglement of socioeconomic responsibilities” (591). Her reading of animal-human relations thus also serves as a welcome intervention into Animal Studies, which remains largely preoccupied with liberal humanist and rights-based approaches to species relations. Crucially, by providing Anne Brontë with renewed critical attention, Harner gestures towards the necessity for Victorian literary animal studies to expand its established corpus beyond its current canon of writers. By exploding the current parameters of the field, there will be opportunities to shed light not only on lesser-known authors and works, but also to generate diverse analyses of species relations across genres, forms, and geographies.

Lauren Cullen
University of Oxford