"A Great Disturbance in My Inner Man": The Impossibility of National Unity in Robert Montgomery Bird's Sheppard Lee

Megan Swartzfager
University of Mississippi, maswartz@go.olemiss.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.mackseysymposium.org/virtual2020

Part of the Other Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Other English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://www.mackseysymposium.org/virtual2020/all/presentations/30

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by JHU Macksey Symposium Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2020 JHU Richard Macksey National Undergraduate Humanities Research Symposium by an authorized administrator of JHU Macksey Symposium Commons.
Shortly after he dies in a bizarre accident while trying to unbury a treasure that would restore him to his former wealth, Sheppard Lee’s spirit declares that he is disinterested in a mass of people discussing his body’s fate because he is “engrossed by the novelties and charms of a new being, and willing to forget that such a poor devil as Sheppard Lee had ever existed” (Bird 75). Robert Montgomery Bird’s 1836 novel *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* follows the narrative voice of its eponymous character as he forces himself into a string of bodies to escape the unhappiness of his first life following the death of his original body. In each body, all of which are male and all but one of which are wealthy or at least well-mannered and respectable, Lee’s identity is dominated by the character of the body, and his propensities are quickly replaced by those of the body. Also in each body, Lee discovers extreme unhappiness in the life begun by the body’s previous owner and chooses to flee into another body. This cycle ends with Lee once again taking up residence in his original body, which he declares he will “never again seek to exchange,” and achieving contentment not only through his environmental and social resources but through the harmony between his body and his consciousness as well as through his detachment from others (424). As Lee’s spirit moves from body to body, Lee explores the relationship between body and self, often speculating that aspects of a person’s character are rooted in that person’s biology in a way that reveals the novel’s racist, classist agenda.

A scientific foundation provided a means of moralizing relationships between physical and political bodies that could be presented as rational and concrete. Nineteenth-century medicine’s “popular language of the nervous system helped Americans express the consequences on the body and for society of major historical changes: from the pace of technology and urbanization to the rise of Jacksonian Democracy; from the turmoil of social reform to the fraught relations between classes, races, and genders” in a way that grounded issues of
individuals’ political representation and participation in scientific explanations rather than purely cultural ones (Murison 2011, 3). By its definition, the nineteenth-century idea of biological sympathy could have laid a philosophical foundation for the possibility of unity not just between American individuals but between all humans. However, as Murison argues—based primarily on the condition of Lee’s penultimate body, that of the Southern planter Arthur Megrim—sympathy was often pathologized, when it was discussed at all, by physiologists like Samuel George Morton and Robert Montgomery Bird who used physiology to provide evidence for their belief in the incompatibility of and total dissimilarity between people of different races, genders, regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Murison 2008, 3). Because of the close relationship between the terminology of physiology and the terminology of politics, the pathologization of internal bodily sympathy translated well into the pathologization of social sympathy. If “healthy American bodies comprised the healthy body politic, and, as such, the body served as a metonym … for social and political life,” then viewing sympathy as pathological can form the foundation of a political philosophy that construes any attempt at a cohesive national identity as a harmful and destructive disease (Altschuler 13). Such a philosophy directly counters the core tenets of Jacksonian Democracy by criticizing the notion that diverse parts, most of which suffer individual ills, could form a healthy composite.

The primary method by which the novel pathologizes sympathy, and by extension rejects democracy, is the characterization of a variety of American types as physically, and therefore mentally, flawed. Lee’s narration accomplishes this by dwelling on the physical characteristics of individuals whom the novel condemns by displaying the suffering that results from the actions performed by each of Lee’s bodies before and during the time that Lee occupies them. This
suffering further pathologizes sympathy by showing that Lee’s situation worsens significantly when he identifies with other individuals.

The section of the novel in which Lee adopts the body of Tom, an enslaved African American, amplifies the message of the impossibility of interracial sympathy expressed in the section that tells the story of Lee-as-Skinner. Whereas Skinner’s physical weakness is linked to his moral weakness, descriptions of Tom’s body characterize him as seeming almost to be a member of another species in a way that “echoes the racial descriptions in Morton’s work” (Altschuler 135). When Lee awakens in Tom’s body, he expresses distress when “my hand, which I had raised to scratch my head, came into contact with a mop of elastic wool, such as never grew upon the scalp of a white man” (Bird 331). With horror, Lee “snatched [a fragment of looking glass] down, and took a survey of my physiognomy” before exclaiming, “Miserable me!” (Bird 331). At no other point in the novel does the narrative voice express such distress at the body in which it finds itself located, even when that body is severely injured. Lee has this reaction in spite of the fact that he “had ceased to remember all my previous states of existence,” a fact that he attributes to his race by saying, “I could not have been an African had I troubled myself with thoughts of any thing but the present. … Perhaps my mind was stupified—sunk beneath the ordinary level of the human understanding” (Bird 341). Tom’s “reduced or debilitated interiority” is written as a feature of his race—a feature that makes his body incompatible with the consciousness or spirit of Lee, a white man (Murison 2008, 2). The extreme difference described between traits as simple as Tom’s scalp and “the scalp of a white man” and the lack of merging between Lee’s mind and Tom’s mind creates the sense that there is no common ground upon which to create a sympathetic connection between Lee, a white man, and Tom, an African American man. This total lack of sympathy shows that, in the novel’s
political philosophy, no cohesive national identity can exist in a place with racial difference because racial difference is significant enough to remove all means of identification for members of different races.

While race, the feature of bodies in Sheppard Lee that scholars like Murison and Altschuler emphasize, is the most obvious otherizing trait that the novel uses to establish extreme and irreconcilable difference between types of people, the novel emphasizes the physical aspects of a wide variety of traits, not the least of which is class. Several working-class minor characters in the novel, are described as having physical characteristics associated with their social class. All of these characters are white and are therefore less otherized than the non-white characters discussed above, but it is noteworthy that bodily features are used to otherize not just members of the working class but also individuals near the top of the upper class.

Interestingly, none of the novel’s working-class characters are inhabited by Lee’s spirit, a fact that places members of the working class beyond the reach of unifying sympathy. Despite Lee’s statement that “the poor man in America feels himself, in a political view, as he really is, the equal of the millionaire,” he believes one reason that the poor cannot be effectively integrated into a democratic system of governance is that “the unnatural hatred provoked in the bosoms” of the poor by “the offensive pride and arrogance” of the rich puts them beyond the reach of unifying sympathy (Bird 305). Lee would forgive the cultural and social failings he perceives in the poor, but in depriving the poor of sympathy the novel argues against their participation in government by invoking the suggestibility of working-class people as a continuation of a well-established political philosophy. Prior to Jackson’s presidency, property requirements for voting, based on the idea that an individual must be independently wealthy in order to vote without influence from external pressures, were common. By the time that Bird wrote Sheppard Lee,
These requirements had disappeared almost completely for white men. With this in mind, it can be argued that the bodily basis of the argument that Sheppard Lee establishes against suffrage for the poor shows that social standing, an embodied trait displayed through appearances and mannerisms, gives way to minds that the novel believes are as unsophisticated as the bodies that correspond to them. In the novel, this lack of sophistication is associated with a propensity to be easily influenced. The idea that the novel correlates working-class bodies with a lack of intelligence aligns with the aforementioned, long-held idea about suffrage that stated that only landowners should have the right to vote because those who are not financially independent are too easily influenced.

Furthering the idea that working-class people are suggestible and should, therefore, be excluded from participation in governance is Lee-as-Skinner’s encounter with a drunken Irish man, about whom Lee says that he “only saw in him a body to be taken possession of” (Bird 234). This scene brings to mind the aforementioned idea that working-class people act as vessels for the intentions of wealthier people. Lee-as-Skinner identifies the man as nothing more than a vessel, but he discovers that he is unable to use the body as such because the man is not truly dead. Lee’s perception of the Irish man reinforces the idea that working-class people are vessels, and his inability to enter the body excludes the Irish man from sympathy, paralleling both the reason for and the result of the lack of voting rights for members of the working class prior to Jackson’s presidency.

Sheppard Lee’s location of cultural and political identities in the body is a response to its social context: Andrew Jackson’s presidency, increased democracy, and the popularization of science—including race science. The novel, engaging these issues, uses the idea of the importance of the connection between body and mind to protest the changes in political
structures that were taking place in the period surrounding the novel’s publication. Many scholars have analyzed the differences between bodies in Sheppard Lee, but few have engaged with the entire range of them. By examining the differences and faults in each body that Sheppard Lee occupies, as well as some he does not, I have argued that Sheppard Lee condemns democracy based on the idea that issues of class and race make virtually every American unworthy of participating in government. Though nearly two-hundred years have passed since Sheppard Lee’s first publication, this idea has not ceased to be a part of public discourse in America. In fact, it seems that, with another populist president associated with a constituency composed largely of working-class white people, the conversation dominates the current political sphere. In this way, modern socio-political discourse mirrors a longstanding tradition in American literature.