



2020

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Recommended Citation

Swartzfager, Megan A. (2020) “A great disturbance in my inner man”: The Impossibility of National Unity in Robert Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee,” *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 101.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/101>

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Dr. Caroline Wigginton of the University of Mississippi for seeing this manuscript through many revisions.

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Robert Montgomery Bird's 1836 novel *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* in the context of contemporary medical and political paradigms. The novel's eponymous character, a property-owning white man, dies unexpectedly and finds that he has the ability to transfer his spirit into other recently dead bodies. Lee finds himself altered by each body, experiencing the thoughts and feelings and performing the actions typical of each body's previous occupant. By exploring the nineteenth-century idea of biological sympathy in such a way, the novel interprets thought and behavior as products of biology. When viewed through the lens of the Jackson-era expansion of voting rights, this novel can be read as a condemnation of inclusive democracy on the basis that people of different classes and races are irreconcilably different and cannot form the type of coherent whole necessary for effective government. An understanding of how medicine can be politicized is crucial in a time when disease and crime are rhetorically linked to certain racial and socioeconomic groups by the American leadership.

Keywords: Jacksonian Democracy, Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Medical Humanities, Robert Montgomery Bird, Sheppard Lee

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). The satire follows Lee's spirit as it stumbles upon the body of the wealthy brewer John Higginson, a man Lee envied greatly in life. Finding great unhappiness in his life as Higginson, Lee-as-Higginson takes himself to a river, intending to drown himself in it. Here he transfers his consciousness into the body of I. D. Dawkins, a young and insolvent dandy who arrived earlier at the river with the same intention. Lee continues to find unhappiness in each body he occupies, and he ultimately takes possession of four other bodies before finding and inhabiting his original body, which had been mummified. 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.

Written at the height of Jacksonian Democracy, a period known as the Era of the Common Man and characterized largely by the introduction of near-universal male suffrage, the satirical narrative engages with questions surrounding the issue of national unity. Because the period during which the novel was written was shaped by a much more radical form of democracy than had previously been seen in the United States, concerns about the ability of a varied mass of new voters to work effectively toward a common goal pervade the novel. In Bird's *Sheppard Lee*, physical differences between individuals cement the differences between those individuals' characters. As I will show, by focusing on bodily differences and their relationship to differences of mind and behavior, the novel condemns national unity, especially its role in Jacksonian Democracy and the drastically increased suffrage that came with it. The novel argues against the movement toward radical democracy spearheaded by President Andrew Jackson and for a more traditional republican model by characterizing working-class, extremely wealthy, Southern, and non-white bodies—and therefore the minds contained within them—as somehow flawed. Because of their imperfections, these bodies, and the minds within them, could only be flawed citizens. If composed of so many faulty parts, the democratic machine could only operate faultily. By establishing the flawed nature of the bodies and minds of a variety of American types, and by concluding the novel with the titular character's proclamation that he intends to remain in his original body and cease to identify with other individuals, the novel denounces what it characterizes as the ineffectiveness of the incoherent mass of voters and lack of cohesive national identity created by Jacksonian Democracy (424).

Bird's *Sheppard Lee* presents evidence for the fallibility and incompatibility of the American people by establishing a biological basis for differences in class and race. Lee states that the erasure of his identity by the identities of the bodies he inhabits results from the facts that “the

associations of the mind, as well as many of its other qualities, are more dependent upon causes in the body than metaphysicians are disposed to allow” (140) and that “a man’s body is like a barrel, which, if you salt fish in it once, will make fish of every thing you put into it afterward” (209). By this, he means that the bodily factors that influence identity are impossible to separate from the body and will pervade any new consciousness that occupies said body.

Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* has often been read as a commentary on the radically democratic ideas replacing republicanism in antebellum America, and the use of bodily difference has often been a tool in that examination. Literary scholars like Sari Altschuler, D. Berton Emerson, and Justine S. Murison all engage with the novel’s descriptions of human bodies and the way those bodies impact society.¹ However, such work tends to discuss only one aspect of the body. Emerson, for example, engages deeply with the novel’s political aspects, but he is only concerned with Lee’s various bodies on a superficial level, concentrating not on the individualizing traits of different bodies but on the fact that bodies are physical entities that distinguish one person from another simply because they are not interchangeable. He argues that the unsustainability of Lee’s various metempsychoses “counters the republican ideal of impersonal substitutability” (Emerson 235) and is evidence for the “untenability of current democratic practices” (Emerson 238). Altschuler and Murison analyze the novel’s bodies more specifically, focusing primarily on the racial, and sometimes regional, characteristics of those bodies, but they direct the great majority of their attention to only three of the novel’s bodies—namely, Tom, an enslaved man of African descent; Abram Skinner, a wealthy Jewish man; and Arthur Megrim, a hypochondriacal Southern man and member of the planting

¹ Murison addresses the issue of embodiment in *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* in her article “Hypochondria and Racial Interiority in Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee*” and her book *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Altschuler in *The Medical Imagination: Literature and Health in the Early United States*, and Emerson in “‘This is a strange book’: Re-Membering Local Democratic Agency in Bird’s *Sheppard Lee*.” For further discussion, see Benjamin J. Doty’s “Satire, Minstrelsy, and Embodiment in *Sheppard Lee*” and Christopher Looby’s introduction to the 2008 edition of *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself*.

class. In contrast, I will argue that it is a failure to engage thoroughly with the differential treatments of the novel's bodies that leads to a failure to draw out the fullness of the political implications of *Sheppard Lee*. In a novel produced in and responding to a time in which "the republicanism on which the first U.S. models of the body had been built was giving way to the rise of American democracy," there is ample material to show that a great variety of physical differences between different bodies was believed to affect American social and political life (Altschuler 125). Because Bird was also writing in a time defined by an increase in so-called rationalism, the politicization of physiology in the novel yields a philosophy of governance that is based on the superiority of certain types of bodies.

The period that spawned *Sheppard Lee*, an era dominated by the presidency of Andrew Jackson, was largely defined by expanded suffrage for white men, a prioritization of future progress over history and tradition, and political movements by working-class people and other reformers. Despite Jackson's populism and increased opportunities for participation in government, the system of governance that emerged around this time also had major flaws, for which it was widely critiqued: partisan disputes were common, and economic progress was far from ubiquitous.² Sheppard Lee's narrative, rooted in intertwined ideas about Jackson-era politics and the science of human difference, is a reaction to "widespread political engagement, diminished deference to elites, broad white male suffrage, and devout partisanship" that defined the period of

² For more on Jacksonian Democracy, see "The Politics of Past and Progress in Jacksonian Democracy" by Naomi Wulf, *Jacksonian Democracy, 1829-1837* by William MacDonald, and "The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1787-1828" by Daniel Ratcliffe. A variety of literary scholars have argued that other texts of the period also engage with the foundational ideas of Jacksonian Democracy. For a discussion of Edgar Allen Poe's satirical responses to Jacksonian Democracy, see Rick Rodriguez's "Sovereign Authority and the Democratic Subject in Poe." *Poe Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2011, pp. 39-56. For an analysis of Ralph Waldo Emerson's interventions in discussions of Jackson-era politics, see T. G. Garvey's "Emerson's Politics." *College Literature*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2013, pp. 127-135. For an argument regarding the impact of Jacksonian ideals on the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne, see Sara Crosby's "Hawthorne's Ephemeral Genius: The 'Septimius' Manuscripts as a Defense of Jacksonian Authorship." *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 108-132.

Andrew Jackson's presidency (Lynn 82). The 1830s, a period that included Jackson's presidency as well as the period during which Bird wrote *Sheppard Lee*, were a time of great social and political change, and one of the most influential factors in this change was a dramatic shift from a republican form of government to a more radical democracy that expanded suffrage to most white men. The period, defined by a shift toward a type of government in which a large percentage of the white population had the opportunity to participate in governance, was shaped by tension regarding the question of whether all—or even most—of those individuals with the right to vote had the capacity to use their votes rationally, effectively, and in a way that would benefit the nation as a whole. In a time guided by an executive who “promote[d] political equality and self-government and simultaneously entrench[ed] the racial and gender hierarchies that underpinned white men's democracy,” and in a nation consisting of a population described by a range of differences in race, ethnicity, class, and regional characteristics, much of the period's literature—including *Sheppard Lee*, I argue—grappled with the question of whether national cohesion was possible (Lynn 87). For a novel written by Bird, a trained physician and colleague of race scientist and author of *Crania Americana* Samuel George Morton, the answer was firmly negative.

In the years preceding *Sheppard Lee*'s publication, emerging medical ideas provided a new language with which to discuss the idea of harmony between and within harmonic systems, whether those be biological or social. Like many other physicians and natural scientists of the time, Bird “prized unitary systems that explained how the world worked at a variety of levels,” a fact that describes the foundation of both his medical ideas and his political ideas (Altschuler 13). At the same time that “emergent ideas about issues including race, sex, region, and species fractured ... unitary republican models,” physiologists were studying differentiation within and between human bodies in an attempt to prevent human difference from fracturing unitary models of the

body (Altschuler 16). These models tied together disparate components of individual bodies by “relat[ing] local to systemic ills; they described all aspects of the body as interrelated; they tended to present health or disease as general states of the total organism” (Rosenberg 13). A medical term often used at the time to describe the force that united distinct systems of the body while allowing those systems to function differently and experience the internal and external environment in diverse ways was “sympathy,” which was believed to be a function of the nervous system (Murison 2011, 19). This term came to represent the connections between organ systems within a particular body as well as social and political connections between distinct bodies. The concept of biological sympathy established a scientific foundation upon which Bird’s novel could build ideas about bodily difference and its relationship to identity.

Furthermore, 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. As noted by Altschuler and Murison, the most extreme examples of this tactic are seen in the treatment of the bodies of Abram Skinner, who is ethnically Jewish, and Tom, who is an enslaved African American. In each of these non-white bodies, Lee’s voice, the sole unifying feature of the novel and an apt metaphor for sociopolitical sympathy in the nineteenth-century sense of the word, is obliterated, showing the failure of sympathy across racial boundaries. By engaging with only a few of Lee’s various bodies, Murison and Altschuler argue convincingly that the novel uses medical terminology to widen racial divides. Beyond this,

I will argue that the novel's medicalization of differences between not only races but also socioeconomic classes implicitly condemns democracy by arguing for the dissonance of the American public.

The body of Abram Skinner and the pain and infirmity therein are the focus of Lee's narration from the moment Lee enters Skinner's body, and the negative characteristics of the body seem to give way to Skinner's and Lee-as-Skinner's immorality and social suffering. Upon adopting Skinner's body, Lee remarks that he has discovered that he is plagued by "the conditions of age [and] infirmity" such as "a thousand aches in my bones, a great disturbance in my inner man, and a general sense of feebleness and impotency." He states that he has "a constitution just breaking up, if not already broken" (Bird 199). The rest of Lee's time in Skinner's body is spent describing Skinner's greed and lack of compassion before punishing him with public humiliation at the hands of one son and near death at the hands of another. This progression of "Book IV" of *Sheppard Lee* clearly illustrates the novel's philosophy of the connection between body and mind, and it morally denounces Skinner's body by punishing actions that the novel shows follow from Skinner's physical body.

Compounding the novel's condemnation of Skinner's feeble body and the feeble morality that it produces is the fact that Skinner is ethnically Jewish. When Lee adopts Skinner's body, he has already undergone the process of metempsychosis multiple times, previously occupying the bodies of wealthy brewer John H. Higginson and insolvent gentleman I. D. Dawkins, both of whom are relatively distinguished white men. Skinner's being Jewish otherizes him in a way that no feature of Higginson or Dawkins does, and this is the reason that "Abram Skinner destroyed every trait that had belonged to Sheppard Lee: and as for those I had taken from John H. Higginson and I. D. Dawkins, they were lost in like manner" (Bird 210). While the bodies of Higginson and

Dawkins overtake Lee's identity, this statement implies that this subordination is less complete than the destruction Lee claims to have experienced in Skinner's body. When race and class boundaries are not crossed, Lee is able to retain some piece of his identity; bodies that are unlike Lee's original body in these two ways eliminate the possibility of retention of identity. This notion conforms with Bird's belief in "incommensurable regional, racial, sexual, and even taxonomic differences between bodies" and with his colleague Samuel George Morton's *Crania Americana*, which helped to reinforce racist ideas of human difference by framing sociocultural differences in terms of biology (Altschuler 125). Additionally, while Lee mentions feeling overtaken by the personalities of other bodies he occupies, he loses more agency in Skinner's body than in those others—so much so that he says, "I hope that the reader will not hesitate to attribute all my actions, while in Abram Skinner's body, to Abram Skinner's body itself" (Bird 202). By showing that Skinner's moral and social failings are characteristic of his ethnicity, the novel establishes race as a key factor in identity; by making Lee's spirit incompatible with Skinner's non-white body, the novel makes race a difference that cannot be overcome by sympathy.

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. The wealthy John H. Higginson, as well as several working-class minor characters in the novel, are described as having physical characteristics associated with their social classes. 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.

The body of John H. Higginson, a wealthy brewer whose body Lee occupies in his first transference, serves to identify perceived flaws of affluent people. Lee is immediately overjoyed at having transmigrated into the body of the extremely wealthy, influential, and respected Higginson because he believes his life will be easy and extravagant, but the majority of his experience in that body is marred by the onset of gout in his foot. Upon the discovery of this painful disease, Higginson's doctor tells him that it is "one of the small penalties one must pay for being a gentleman; when one dances, one must pay the piper" (Bird 77). By casting the punishingly painful disease as a mere byproduct of an affluent person's life of rich food and drink, the novel presents a luxurious lifestyle as something immoral and deserving of harsh penalty. In this way, Higginson's class shapes his body, and the bodily ramifications shape his consciousness. Because class has such a strong influence on the body, and because the relationship between class, body, and consciousness is self-reinforcing, the consciousness of a member of one class is irreconcilable with the consciousness of a member of another class. This removes all grounds for sympathy across class boundaries.

The novel furthers the idea that individual wealth is harmful to society by stating that income inequality and the resulting social stratification results "from that constitution of society which, notwithstanding its being in opposition to all the interests of the land and the character of our institutions, is founded in, and perpetuated by, the folly of the richer classes" (Bird 305). Once again, by displaying the bodily manifestation of a social characteristic, the novel shows that certain behaviors—in this case, profligacy and gluttony—are inherent to members of certain groups and are therefore unsolvable problems. In the novel, it is an inherent feature of wealthy individuals that they create, maintain, and exacerbate differences between themselves and others. Because of this and because class is a crucial and insurmountable part of identity formation, the extremely wealthy

in Bird's novel are largely responsible for what the novel presents as the impossibility of social cohesion necessary for an effective democracy.

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 intensity with which Bird writes of working-class people as being defined by their bodies hints that the reason that poverty excludes people from participation in a national identity has a bodily component—namely, that the lack of refinement the novel depicts in these bodies gives rise to a lack of cognitive sophistication. Here, it is important to acknowledge that Lee

himself is insolvent near the beginning of the novel, and so is I. D. Dawkins, the young “dandy” in search of a rich wife whose body Lee occupies in his second metempsychosis. For the purposes of this paper, however, these characters are excluded from classification as working-class or impoverished because they were raised with money and are therefore socially refined and educated. 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.

The novel clearly establishes the connection between an impoverished, working body and a high level of suggestibility and irrationality in a passage about the men who kidnap Lee-as-Zachariah-Longstraw, a Quaker philanthropist and Lee’s fifth body, to deliver him for a bounty to wealthy Southern slaveholders seeking a well-known abolitionist. In a highly satirical passage, a man’s irrationality is paralleled by his bodily disfigurement. Lee-as-Longstraw has been kidnapped by poor Southerners who intend to sell him for a reward offered for the delivery of an abolitionist for lynching. Because Longstraw was not outspoken in his abolitionist sentiments, his kidnappers must create for him an abolitionist identity in order for him to be valuable.

It was astonishing (and to none more than myself) to witness the suddenness with which I was exalted from obscurity to distinction, and the readiness with which every living soul, upon being told my name, character, and reputation, remembered all about me and my misdeeds. “Yes,” cried one worthy personage, shaking at me a fist minus two fingers and a half, “I have heard of him often enough: he lives in New-York, and he sells sendary pictures. . . .” (Bird 319)

It is not entirely clear whether the people that Lee's kidnappers tell about Longstraw's past "remembe[r] all about [him] and [his] misdeeds" out of bloodthirst or out of suggestibility, but the use of dialect in the description of their responses and the extreme satire in Lee's reaction—he is "astonish[ed]" by his "sudde[n]" rise to "distinction"—imply that the Southerners described "remember[ing]" because they are highly suggestible as a result of being unintelligent. The incomplete mind of the first person whose response Lee-as-Longstraw recounts is paralleled by his incomplete body, as shown by his "fist minus two fingers and a half." This parallelism goes to explain *Sheppard Lee*'s central philosophy of the relationship between body and mind, namely that the body is the root and source of a person's key personality traits, and the "worthy personage" is evidence for two types of inferiority that Bird constructs in the novel: regional inferiority and class inferiority (Bird 319).

The scene involving this Southern man clearly shows resentment of people with characteristics associated with the working class. The person's missing fingers are likely indicative of a life of manual labor, and he is characterized as unintelligent by his suggestibility in "remember[ing]" Longstraw "upon being told [his] name, character, and reputation" (Bird 319). The link between these perceived class characteristics and the character's body implies a philosophy in which people of different social groups are biologically, and therefore inherently and unchangeably, different.

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.³

Throughout the novel, Lee's presence is the narrative's only unifying factor, attempting to bind together a variety of bodies. This fact likens Lee to the nineteenth-century medical concept of sympathy, something that many believed to be "a unifying concept flexible enough to accommodate the differences between distinct bodies and body parts" (Altschuler 127). However, Lee's constant suffering in the bodies of others, his complete inability to establish a connection with members of the working class, and the obliteration of his identity when he occupies non-white bodies all show that sympathy is not powerful enough to "accommodate the differences" between even relatively similar people. In fact, the last body Lee occupies before returning to his own is that of Arthur Megrim, an idle man of the planter class who suffers from hypochondria: an instance of disease that, Murison writes, is defined by "identification with and internalization of the things surrounding him" (Murison 2008, 8). Megrim's identification with objects outside himself parallels Lee's identification with other individuals through metempsychosis throughout the novel, and it is significant that it is after repeated metempsychotic experiences that Lee-as-Megrim suffers a disease, rooted in the body but plaguing the mind, that is both source and symptom of identification with others. With this knowledge, it is interesting to note that Lee, before his metempsychosis, is described as having "the wrong place in [his] upper story" (Bird 53). This

³ It is also important to note here that Irish people were not considered white during the period in which this novel was written. Because of this classification, the Irishman's exclusion from sympathy is yet another example of the novel's belief in the impossibility of sympathy between people of different races.

pathologization of sympathy as a mental and physical illness is a firm condemnation of interpersonal sympathy, and therefore of a cohesive national identity that would necessarily be the result of identification between citizens. To be cured, Lee must return to his original body and resolve to “never again seek to exchange it for another” because identification with other individuals is medically impossible and absurd (Bird 425).

In the middle of *Sheppard Lee*, Lee plainly states what the novel shows throughout: that he sees different types of human bodies as inherently differing in value and that this fact is politically meaningful. Lee suggests, amid his own frustration at not finding a suitable body into which to transfer his spirit, that the majority of citizens should have their bodies converted to manure at the times of their deaths so that they can be useful to society (Bird 228). However, Lee says, “As for the president, we would have him reserved for a nobler purpose; we would have him boiled down to soap,” and he states that “other methods should be taken with particular classes of men, who might claim a more distinguished and canonical disposition of their bodies. The rich and tender would esteem it a cruelty to be disposed of in the same way with the multitude” (Bird 229). This one passage presents the novel’s anti-democratic message in two ways. First, it reinforces the idea of a close relationship between bodily difference and cognitive difference by stating that the bodies of people in different social classes and political roles should be disposed of in different ways. Second, it emphasizes the role of the executive, the president, in national identity by saying that the president’s body should be “boiled down to soap” at the time of his death (Bird 229). By associating the head of the executive branch with a tool for cleansing the public, the novel again draws attention to political failings of the masses like that displayed when members of a political rally become distracted and seek to lynch Lee-as-Longstraw. A stronger, more independent

executive than is present in a democratic nation would have the ability to clean away such flaws in the political system by polishing the people and ideas represented in government.

By focusing on the exaggerated descriptions of bodies in *Sheppard Lee* and placing the novel in the political context of the Andrew Jackson presidency as well as of physiological ideas popular among medical scholars in the nineteenth century, it can be argued that Bird's novel comments on the distress that many people experienced at the increased participation in governance during the so-called Era of the Common Man. In the novel, bodies shape the minds that occupy them, and exaggerating an individual's physical characteristics—especially negative ones—calls attention to the resultant mental and social failings of that individual. Lee's variety of destructive metempsychotic experiences in the novel show the failing of interpersonal sympathy, especially across boundaries of race and class. This failure of sympathy is evidence of the novel's belief in the impossibility of a cohesive national identity: something that would be necessary if democracy were to be an effective form of governance. By also showing failures of democracy, particularly apparent in the scene in which members of a political rally attempt to lynch Lee-as-Longstraw, the novel not only identifies but explains the issues it perceives in national governance in the nineteenth-century United States.

If the eponymous character of *Sheppard Lee* is viewed as a representation of the concept of sympathy as defined medically and socially at the time that Bird was writing, Lee's suffering in each of his vastly different adopted bodies and his decision at the end of the novel to be content in his original body shows that "the sympathy between Lee's spirit and white bodies may be uncomfortable and ultimately untenable, but interracial sympathy is cataclysmic" (Altschuler 145). Beyond this, any significant difference between the lived experiences of different individuals, represented in the novel by differences in the bodies of those individuals, makes sympathy of any

kind harmful. One scene in particular links this lack of sympathy, which leads to a lack of national cohesion, to a failure or corruption of democracy. When Lee-as-Longstraw is kidnapped, he finds himself interrupting a political rally led by a charismatic orator who, at seeing his audience becoming distracted, shifts his focus to the proposition that the crowd collectively lynch Lee-as-Longstraw. The various participants react to the politician's speech with enthusiasm, and "here the orator, who had pronounced this sublime exordium with prodigious earnestness and effect, paused. . . . As for me, I felt a doleful skepticism as to the justness of the compliment, having the very best reason to distrust that love of liberty, law, order, and justice, which was about to consign me to ropes and flames" (Bird 323). In light of the impossibility of a cohesive national identity that the novel establishes through various instances and failures of metempsychosis, Jacksonian Democracy and the increased suffrage it entails become not only ineffectual and unfocused but also destructive.

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.

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