

Marianne Moore's *Bird-Witted* encompasses many of the themes that Moore laces through all of her poetry, including religion, protection, maternal love, the use of animals to explicate meanings, and the crossing of nature with civilization. For this reason, a number of papers could be written on *Bird-Witted*. However this paper will examine *Bird-Witted*'s inclusion of three kinds of protection, those being maternal protection, self-protection, and the use of protection to go into the world, not drawback. Explication of how these three types of protection resound in Moore's own life will also be addressed. To strengthen and clarify the analyses of these themes, comparisons and connections will be drawn to other poems in her cannon where she demonstrates these three instances of protection.

Characteristic of Moore, these three themes of protection are not apparent at the surface, and the connection to her own life are even more buried and subtle within the poem. Charles Molesworth wrote that Moore never used "explicit imagery" in expressing her underlying themes (Molesworth 228).

The maternal protection exhibited in "*Bird-Witted*" is likely to be the most obvious to the reader of the three forms of protection. Undoubtedly, maternal protection, founded by love, is shown in the mother mocking bird's efforts to protect her fledglings by providing them with food and defending them against predators. These actions are shown in the poem clearly by the way that Moore describes them as an observation. In fact, in two letters, one to her brother Warner, and one to Bryher, Moore writes about mocking birds observed outside her window (Molesworth 228).

At the beginning of the poem the fledglings are described as being almost as large as their mother, however, it shows her still "bringing something which will partially feed one of them" (Moore 105). Although her young are now large enough to be out of their nest, and their

mother's efforts to bring them food hardly suffices, she still continues to do so. The poem even describes her picking up a dropped beetle from one of the fledgling's mouth and putting it back in its beak. Below is an image of a young mockingbird, perhaps calling out for its mother to feed it.



At the end of the poem, the mother mocking-bird is shown physically protecting the three young against a cat that is shown threatening their lives. She does not hesitate, but darts down with her “bayonet beak and cruel wings” (Moore 105) to fend off the dangerous cats who the young are too ignorant to recognize as a threat. This is done out of the maternal instinct to protect one's young, it is not a question or choice, it is merely one of the duty's of a mother.

Bernard Engle, in defining the title “Bird-Witted,” described the term in accordance with the mother to mean “accepting her duty of her young, and of necessity taking a serious view of life...” (Engle 91). Part of what he is saying in that definition is the fact that the mother's call to action happens unconsciously and without thought or plan, only the maternal instinct to rescue

her fledglings as they are faced with danger. Donald Hall described the mother mocking-bird as “...courageous because she has to be; her life demands it,” and goes on to say that the mother’s protection is instinctual, yet entirely out of love (Hall 106).

The mother mocking-bird’s undying protection over her fledgling is not without a price. In constantly providing unwavering protection to her young since their birth, she herself had to have made sacrifices in her own life, as well as the toll it took on her physically. In the fourth stanza, Moore describes how the mother “no longer sings the ‘delightful’ notes of her pre-motherhood days; now that she is ‘astute,’ her voice has become ‘harsh’” (Engle 91). This overtly demonstrates the price that the mother has paid in order to maintain protection of her fledglings.

“The Paper Nautilus” (p.121) is another of Moore’s poem that strongly exhibits the same maternal protection out of love that is exhibited in “Bird-Witted” (Molesworth 288). Although it seems that the mother mollusk’s protection of her paper thin glass shell which holds her eggs is much more delicate than the mother bird in “Bird-Witted” who swoops down to combat a cat with her bayonet combat beak, the motive behind these actions is synonymous. Both mothers do it not only out of maternal instinct, but out of the unselfish desire to protect their babies. Below is an image of a nautilus.



The first stanza of “The Paper Nautilus” addresses all the reasons why the mother *does not* “construct her thin glass shell” for her babies. Moore explains that she is not doing it for anyone else or for any self gain. “For authorities whose hopes/ are shaped by mercenaries?/Writers entrapped by/teatime fame and by /commuters’ comforts? Not for these” (1-5). The mother receives no reward or recognition for diligently creating an intricate and delicate shell for her eggs to reside, but merely does it out of a mother’s duty to protect her unborn, helpless, babies.

The mother mollusk in constructing this delicate glass shell exhibits the same unselfishly willingness to protect her offspring as the mother mocking bird who makes as many trips as needed to feed her almost grown fledglings. Just as the mother mollusk gains nothing from constructing and protecting her thin glass shell, the mother bird does not gain anything by ensuring that her large fledgling are fed. In fact, the fledgling do not only appear to be unappreciative of their mother’s labor, but they also seem to expect it from her. Moore shows this in the second stanza, describing how they begin to squeak as soon as they see her because they know she is bringing them food. This has no effect on her willingness to do so though, nor does it prevent her from picking up the dropped beetle for the fledgling.

At the end of the second stanza in “The Paper Nautilus,” Moore describes how the mother mollusk devotedly watches over the shell that she has created to protect her unborn babies. This shows that not only did she make the shell out of duty and necessity of a place to put her eggs, but after finishing it, she continues to stay by that shell of eggs both through day and night to ensure that nothing happens to them. This exhibits the mother’s strong unwavering protection. Moore even goes so far to say that the mother hardly eats anything while she hovers

over her babies, emphasizing the strong dedication as a watchful mother that she possesses. These actions also demonstrate the sacrifices the mother makes and continues to make.

These are the same maternal sacrifices that Moore shows in “Bird-Witted.” The mother mollusk’s inability to eat as a result of serving as protector for her young is similar to “how harsh” the mother mocking bird’s voice has become due to the wear and tear that goes along with that maternal protection. Both mothers’ devotion in protecting their young through vigilance and providing food are so important to the mothers that they sacrifice their own deterioration.

Emphasizing maternal protection reflects Moore’s own close relationship with her mother. Throughout her animal poems, Moore hardly ever specifies gender, however when she does, it is almost always a mother that is identified (Willis 314). What this shows about Moore is the respect and value she held for her own mother, which was so important to Moore that she used mother animals as symbols of heroism in her poems.

The role that Moore’s mother played in her life may have been arguably larger than in most families for the reason that she was a single parent to Marianne Moore and her brother Warner (Willis 114). This probably played a part in increasing the closeness between them, as well as the protection displayed by Moore’s mother, since she was her children’s sole provider and protector. Moore lived with her mother for the entirety of her mother’s life, which also increased the two women’s close relationship, and the mother’s continual protection.

Moore’s mother also played a large role in helping Moore write her poetry and served as one of Moore’s main critics, including “Bird-Witted.” In a letter to her brother Warner, Moore writes, “We are having a *terrible* time with a poem on three mocking-birds that I am writing...Mouse blinks and blinks and reflects and bleats and then with doubting conjecture

returns it for improvements!! And the pattern is such as not to admit to *any* change whatever. Antbear alive!” (Costelleo 331) “Mouse” is a nickname Moore used for her mother in writing. This letter, written by Moore herself, displays just how much Moore’s mother helped in the composition of Moore’s work.

When slightly stretched, it can be considered maternal protection, in that Moore’s mother protected Moore in her writing career by helping in the writing process so that her daughter could successfully explode into the literary world. Like the mother mocking-bird and the mother mollusk, Moore’s mother made self sacrifices in terms of her own endeavors. She did not spend much time exerting energy into any personal goals she may have had. It was more important to her that her daughter became successful in her career as a writer.

Moore’s use of self-protection in “Bird-Witted” is far more subtle and requires a deeper study to extract. “Bird-Witted” exhibits self-protection in somewhat of a reversed way, portraying the possible dangers that can occur when one does not practice self-protection or when maternal protection is too heavily relied upon. The strength of the mother mocking-bird’s protection is apparent in “Bird-Witted,” which raises a certain tension that it can create due to the need for the fledgling’s individuality (Molesworth 288). There is no doubt that the mother’s protection of her fledgling is completely out of love, however, the result of relying solely on their almost proved to be fatal for the three fledglings.

In the first stanza, Moore writes, “...three/large fledgling mocking-birds below/the pussy-willow tree/stand in a row” (2-4). These lines describe how the mocking-birds no longer roost in their nest, probably due to the fact that they are now “large,” indicating also that they are older in age. This sets up the scene for the next section which shows their mother, who is “no longer larger” (7) than them bringing them food. There are two problems that this raises. The first is that

these fledglings are comparable in size to their mother and are able to leave the nest, which suggests that they should probably be retrieving their own food. Secondly, the mother clearly realizes that the amount of food she brings back is insufficient for even one of her fledgling, yet she continues to fetch the food for them anyone, supporting their dependency on her.

Initially, it seems that the mother mocking-bird is to blame for protecting her fledglings to the point of suffocation, leaving them unable to fend for themselves. However, it is ultimately the fledgling that suffer for allowing themselves to depend fully on their mother. When the fledglings first hatched from their eggs, the mother mocking-bird probably did not stray far from them for long periods of time because the three birds were completely helpless to external dangers. For the majority of “Bird-Witted,” though, the three fledglings are shown sitting by themselves on a willow tree branch. The mother bird knows that they are old enough to be left alone for longer amounts of time. During this time, the three fledglings could leave their perch to explore the world on their own, perhaps even finding sufficient amounts of food to eat. Instead, the three fledglings are shown perched on a branch waiting for their mother to bring food to them.

The three fledglings’ unwillingness to learn their surroundings by themselves throughout the poem later results in a near fatal run in with a cat. In the fifth stanza, “A piebald cat observing them/is slowly creeping toward the trim/trio on the tree-stem/Unused to him/the three make room—(41-45). Most birds would quickly fly away if a cat began to approach them, but because these three fledglings have depended so heavily upon their mother to protect them, they have no sense to protect themselves.

The title “Bird-Witted” describes these three fledgling in the usual meaning of the term, which is being unable to care for oneself (Engle 91). This term accurately exemplifies the three

fledglings when they are faced with the danger of the cat. They do not know to fly away or to deter the cat, instead they unknowingly make room for the cat. Moore describes the cat as a “intellectual, cautious/ly creeping cat” (59-60). Perhaps the word “intellectual” is used to describe the cat because through observing them in line 41, he was able to recognize that they were bird-witted. He knew that the mother was not around to protect the three birds, and knew that they would not know any better than to remain sitting on the tree branch as he approached.

It is not until the mother, described as “The Parent,” darts down to defend her three fledglings against the cat. Again, the three young birds had the chance to defend themselves against the cat, but yet again they sat and waited until their mother came and protected them. In this instance she is not smothering her young with her vigil protection, but is instead forced to step in when the three are unwise to the danger of the situation. Ultimately, Moore seems to be subtly interjecting her beliefs in the importance of establishing self-protection in order to survive independently. She takes a back door approach to demonstrate this by showing what can happen if self-protection is not created, using the three young fledgling as her example.

“Nevertheless” (p.125) is another of Moore’s poem where she addresses the importance of self-protection. In this poem self-protection is emphasized more directly. Moore characteristically glorifies plants or animals for exemplifying traits that she values, such as hard work or persistence. Here Moore admires various plants and fruits for their ability to overcome obstacles in order to survive. She commends these plants for using any means of self-protection needed to ensure existence.

In the fourth stanza, Moore writes “Frost that kills/the little rubber-plant/leaves of kok-saghyz-stalks, can’t/harm the roots; they still grow/in frozen ground” (10-14). Although this small plant is overcome by frost that it cannot avoid, that does not stop its roots from growing in

the frozen ground. This is its self-protecting survival method. Instead of giving up and dying, the small plant finds a way to preserve itself to ensure continued existence.

Moore gives another example of a plant overcoming the threat of something larger than itself in the fifth stanza. She writes “Once where/there was a prickly-pear/leaf clinging to barbed wire/a root shot down to grow/in earth two feet below” (14-18). Here the circumstance of survival is even more unlikely; however, the plant goes to the length needed to ensure self-preservation. For a root to shoot down from a barbed wire fence to grow in the Earth seems miraculous and even impossible, but it is what the plant must do in order to survive, so it does. Moore glorifies the ability for the plant to do this because she understands the importance of self-protection.

Moore explicitly writes two lines in this poem that epitomize the importance of self-protection. In the seventh stanza she writes, “Victory won’t come/to me unless I go to it” (20-21). This is Moore stating quite obviously that in order to attain one’s goals and successes, he/she must proactively go after them. Victory will not come by sitting on a tree branch waiting to be taken care of, like in *Bird-Witted*. One must maintain the self-protection of not only wanting to succeed, but taking the necessary measures to ensure success. It is only that person who can accomplish the desired goal, no one else can do it for them. Although the mother mocking-bird is seen rescuing her fledgling in “*Bird-Witted*,” there will come a time when she will not be around to protect them, and they will probably meet their fate. To ensure survival the three fledgling must take initiative to learn how to survive on their own.

In stanza ten, Moore writes, “The weak overcomes its/menace, the strong over/comes itself” (28-30). Here, it seems that Moore is saying that no matter the person, or in this poem, plant, everyone and everything have something that they must self-protect against. The weak

must develop self-protection in order to overcome threats that seem larger than them, such as the frost on the small plant. This form of protection could be physically or mentally, mentally in that the weak are often faced with the threat of someone more powerful controlling their actions or making decisions for them. Just as shown in “Bird-Witted,” the fledgling must realize that they must take what they learn from their mother to in turn protect themselves (Willis 112).

However, the strong must overcome itself, that is to say that the strong must not rely so heavily on their knowing that they are strong. Focusing on being the best or the strongest can be a danger because the strong may not realize the importance of self-protection, possibly even against themselves, and lose sight of maintaining success, survival, and personal values.

Another poem where Moore writes about her admiration for an animal who is able to use self-protection for survival is “The Wood-Weasel” (p.127). She writes that “He is his own protection” (10). For this she admires him because he does not have to rely on anyone or anything else to protect him. He can fend entirely for himself. She does not, however, describe the wood-weasel abusing his defense mechanism. In fact she says that his disposition is playful, only defending himself when attacked by an attacker. This exemplifies the self-protection of oneself that Moore described in “Nevertheless.”

Resorting back to “The Paper Nautilus,” (p.121), Moore addresses the thin line addresses the thin line between a mother’s maternal protection and the danger of suffocation (Molesworth Literary Life). Moore addresses this tension in the third stanza, pointing out that the unborn babies are hidden by their mother’s fierce protection, yet the delicate shell of eggs is “not crushed” (20). The mother mollusk shows undying faith in protecting her babies, but realizes that they need room to grow, literally, and is careful not to smother them. Here, perhaps Moore’s belief in the strong overcoming themselves, as illustrated in “Nevertheless,” is being shown. It

would be easy for the mother mollusk to get too carried away in the desire to protect her eggs and literally smother them; however, she realizes she must protect herself from doing this, and instead gives them room to grow.

As addressed in “Bird-Witted” and “The Paper Nautilus,” the line between maternal protection and suffocation is extremely thin, and a tension that almost definitely existed between Moore and her own mother. To ensure self-success, Moore viewed self-protection to be equally, if not more, important. In Moore’s own life, she faced the struggle to create success built on her own values and beliefs and not succumb to the public and critics, her biggest one being her mother.

Although Moore and her mother were extremely close, it would be almost impossible to avoid some tension, especially since the two lived together until Moore’s mother passed. Moore was faced with the obstacle to grow as an individual while still living under the roof of her mother. It is often extremely easy for children to accept and hold the same values and beliefs as their parents and end up not establishing their own, just as was seen in “Bird-Witted,” where it was easier for the fledglings to remain taken care of than fend for themselves.

It is not surprising then that Moore and her mother shared the same basic beliefs in terms of values and religion. Both were highly involved in the Presbyterian church, attending regularly, and even suggesting sermon ideas to the pastor. Although religion was greatly valued and shared between the two women, Moore’s mother was much more traditional and strict in her thinking, compared to Moore, who was considered more modern. This is where discrepancies likely arose, especially in the creation of some of Moore’s writing.

Moore’s mother played an enormous part in Moore’s poetry, being one of her biggest critics and put her approval on everything that went to be printed. Because Moore was more

modern than her mother, her mother did not always agree or approve of some of Moore's ideas or art that she valued and respected. The letter that Moore wrote to her brother clearly showed the involvement Moore's mother had in her poetry. Because the two had some conflicting views, Moore struggled to maintain her own views, some of which her mother did not agree with, and create poetry that reflected them. Assumedly, this is where Moore developed her strong belief in self-protection. It is said that as Marianne Moore became older she revolted less in terms of her mother's strict views of religiosity. That is not to say that Moore did not practice self-protection. When analyzing her poetry, her core beliefs and values still shine through, it is still Marianne Moore that is talking, not her mother.

It is no question that Moore uses and presents her reader with ideas of protection, both maternal protection and self-protection, in her poetry; but it seems of utmost importance to realize that although she emphasizes these ideas of protection, all of her protected animals and plants are seen using protection to go out into the world, not to hide from it or draw back. One might often associate strong protection with being sheltered and avoiding dangers in life, but ultimately Moore seems to be stressing the importance of protection to go into the world and face the dangers one might encounter.

In "Bird-Witted," as discussed before, maternal protection is heavy and the self-protection of the three fledglings is lacking. Moore uses both, though, to stress the importance of how integral it is to have both in order to go into the world and face the dangers it may present, specifically the cat in this poem.

Maternally, the mother protects her three fledglings partially to demonstrate and prepare them to live on their own, without her. She protects their innocence, and ignorance of the world, but in the end wants them to take her knowledge and use it to protect themselves (Willis). As

earlier, if the mother had not rescued the three young birds from the cat they are presented with at the end of the poem, at least one of them may have been injured or killed. Their mother's action identified to them that this cat was a threat and demonstrated what need to be done to fend him off.

It is then the three fledgling's job to take this knowledge, learn from it, and use it to further their progress in entering the world independent of their mother. At the beginning of the poem, self-protection was absent in the fledglings, shown by them not retrieving their own food, and instead relying on their mother to bring them food. At the end of the poem when the three are faced with the cat and it is obvious they are ignorant to the danger, Moore is perhaps saying that if these three young do not take their mother's illustrations of protection and use it to self-protect, they will not survive on their own. She presents the three fledglings having an eye-opening, near fatal encounter in order to caution the reader of what can happen when self-protection is not established.

It is the job of the fledglings to protect themselves from being too protected and dependent on their mother. In order to go out into the world on their own, they must resist the urge to allow their mother to do everything for them, including bringing them food and literally picking up dropped food and placing it in their mouth. In allowing their mother to be their sole protector, they fail to establish literal self-protection in defending themselves from the cat, as less as hunger.

The mother bird is not shown hiding her babies away from the world or constantly hovering over them at all times, indicating that she wishes for her young to eventually fend for themselves. What is suggested is that as she continues to leave them on their own, while still taking care of them as needed, they will eventually begin getting their own food and learning

from their mother how to defend themselves from predators. As this happens, the fledglings will ideally learn to depend less and less on their mother by protecting themselves from her over protectiveness, and become more and more independent and self-sufficient in getting their own food and physically protecting themselves with future run ins with cats, etc...

Moore's poem "The Pangolin" (p.117) presents the idea, and possibly the necessity, of using protection to go into the world. The pangolin is "another armored animal," Moore writes. It is exteriorly covered completely by large scales, which Moore compares to the look of an artichoke. When it rolls itself into a ball, Moore says it "has/power to defy all effort to unroll it" (25-26). As added protection its scales are sting-proof. Below are two images of a pangolin; in the second image, the pangolin is rolled up into its impenetrable ball.





Moore regards the build, structure, outer appearance as beautiful, writing, “the night miniature artist engineer is/yes, Leonardo da Vinci’s replica” (5-6). Biographically, art played a large part in Moore’s life. She used it to inspire her work, and also seemed to identify with the modern painters, respecting their imagination and ability to keep it protected. Her strong appreciation for imagination and especially art showed through in much of her poetry, and clearly here she is admiring the pangolin for its artistic beauty.

However, Moore rears the characteristics of the pangolin to be equally, if not more admirable. These characteristics are being that of a toiler, rendering a hard worker, which Moore identifies to be commendable. In the third stanza she writes of the pangolin that he, “endures/exhausting solitary trips through unfamiliar ground at night/returning before sunrise” (14-16). Moore admired the ability to demonstrate endurance even in times of adversity as she

illustrates here through the pangolin. Although the pangolin is armed with complete protection against any possible predator, Moore describes the pangolin to “draw/away from danger unpugnaciously/with no sound but a harmless hiss” (20-22). Here Moore is showing that the pangolin, though heavily equipped with armor is not an aggressive animal looking for trouble. Instead, it is the thick protective armor that allows the pangolin to live each day and remain unharmed by outside dangers.

It appears that Moore seems to emphasize the necessity to practice self-protection, here by showing an exteriorly protected pangolin. Although the armor on the pangolin is thick, it is not to draw back from the world and become hermit-like; instead Moore shows the pangolin going about its day to day activities and endeavors. However, it is the armored self-protection that allows the pangolin to engage in these endeavors even through adversity and harmful danger.

Moore describes the use of the pangolin’s thick shield of protective armor to be beneficial in facing physical dangers such as predators, but also implies an idea of personal mental protection in enduring adversity. The later of these two harms seem to resound clearly in Moore’s own life. During Moore’s life and writing career, she was a female poet that was considered modern. For all of these reasons, she herself faced an abundance of adversity from critics and society itself. Because of this, Moore practiced restraint in order to protect herself from these menaces to maintain personal strength.

Unlike many modern poets in her day, such as William Carlos Williams, Moore did not unveil everything about herself loosely and openly. Williams’ poetry spoke loudly and directly about his personal life as a doctor, lover of women, and views on society, religion, and values.

Moore, however, practiced a much more conservative life, attending to her Protestant religion, while not divulging her religion or personal values directly.

Like the pangolin, Moore created a thick shield of armor in her poetry through the strong use of subversion. At the surface, the poems appear to be chiefly observations of the animals, plants, and art which she took great delight in. However, in closer studies, almost every poem is used to speak about a much larger idea that Moore values, whether it be religion, family issues, societal issues, etc...In a way Moore uses such restraint and protection in creating complex, sometimes puzzling, poems in order to really express her ideals and beliefs.

Because she is faced with such scrutiny and adversity like the pangolin, it is the thick armor of subversion Moore layers on her poetry that allows her to say what she really wants to say. Some critics may say Moore does this, or too heavily uses subversion, to hide her personal life and values from society, referring to her as somewhat hermit-like; however it seems Moore is actually protecting herself from critics like these that are so quick to judge by embedding her true meanings underneath unsuspecting observations of plants and animals. So in fact, Moore is not drawing back from society or critics at all; she is using the protection of subversion to speak her religion, values, and personal life. She saw the harm that critics could impose upon artists like her, corrupting their imagination, shooting down their values, and judging their personal life. For this very reason, Moore recognized the importance of protection in order to successfully go forward.

After scrupulously studying several of Moore's poems that incorporate protection, including maternal, self, and protection as a means to go forth in the world, it is obvious that Moore recognized the value, practice, and importance of all three not only for society, but also in her own life. While she emphasizes the love that founds maternal protection, she also cautions

the dangers that can result from depending too heavily upon it, and the importance of establishing self-protection.

By self-protection, Moore means resisting the urge to depend solely upon a parent or stronger force, and instead grow independently, establishing one's own values, beliefs, and means for survival. It is also important, Moore identifies, to protect oneself from outside adversities and predators. While she recognizes the importance of this, she also says that this self-protection should be used to go into the world to face these harms, not away from it to remain in seclusion.

Outlining protection so complexly and thoroughly through poems that outwardly seem off-topic and puzzling only demonstrates the subversive genius of Marianne Moore. Again and again, she requires the reader to look closer and study deeper to uncover the true meanings of what she wanted to express through her poetry. Although done protectively using thick subversion, when uncovered her voice is bold, strong, and resounding.

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