

Romanticism, Nature and Ecology

Perhaps the most analysed aspect of the Romantics' lives today remains their fervent adoration of nature, often also cited as the germinal site of modern environmentalism. Ecocriticism, lying at the intersection of literature and environment, has not lagged behind in exploring the dynamic relationship between British Romanticism and modern environmental debates – giving rise to an entirely new sub-field called 'Green Romanticism' or 'Romantic Ecology'. While Romanticism has provided a fertile ground to ecocriticism for many debates to emerge, two important strands of thought dominate the discourse. The former, and more aged, which staunchly defends the debt owed by ecological studies to romanticism and the other, relatively newer, which problematizes the relationship on grounds of classism, cultural contingency and colonial environmental destruction that arose alongside European ecological consciousness.

This essay sets out to fulfil several tasks. Primarily, to trace the development of ecological consciousness through Romantic literature and poetry, focusing specifically on the works of William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley. It will further engage with critics that problematize this literary-environmental affair. And finally, to put forth middle ground approach, acknowledging romantic writings as the basis of the environmental movement but also bringing to light the multiplicity of perspectives that have been traditionally occluded from the Western ecology debate.

The Wilderness Concept

In the pre-romantic and pre-transcendentalist era, attitudes towards wilderness largely remained hostile. 'Savage', 'barren', 'tempestuous' were prevalent terms of description. A lot of this antagonism was rooted in Biblical metaphors. Located on the margins of civilization, wilderness was where the supernatural dwelt, where men and women were tempted to move away from God and where confusion and despair reigned. The advent of industrialisation in the eighteenth further promoted the lure of the city, far away from wilderness.

Romanticism developed as a reaction to Industrialisation and the myriad problems it brought along. Obsession of romantic artists with wilderness played upon the drastic societal changes that were taking place, large-scale pollution of the coal-burning in industries which led to water pollution, incredibly poor air quality and the consequent health problems.

Romantic artists depicted and celebrated nature in their art, poetry and musings. The dualistic perspective - one that romanticizes the wild as a place of idyllic solace and one that views it as a bewildering landscape replete with unknown terrors was popularized by almost all Romantics. They saw wilderness as the landscape to experience the purest emotion, one that conjured the sublime. Sublimity became a driving force behind the appreciation for the wild. It dispelled the notion that beauty in nature was seen only in the serene, pristine and orderly landscapes. Vast, chaotic scenery was just as pleasant. The unknown terrors hidden under this beauty came to be regarded with awe more than fear. Sublimity offered wild nature as the clearest medium through which God shows His powers, thus associating wild landscapes with godliness. Wilderness, once an antithesis to all that was good in the world became the antidote to all that was bad in the world.

Nature & Wilderness in the Works of Wordsworth, Keats and Shelly

Among poets of nature, Wordsworth's works and contribution remain unparalleled. Tintern Abbey is a celebration of the serene landscapes of Ireland and their ability to offer tranquillity even when one is far removed from it. The speaker sees nature as a moral guiding force:

*These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,*

*Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings to*

The mountains and the deep rivers of Wye comprised the speaker's coarser relationship with nature in childhood. In adulthood, nature offers him a more profound experience, that of the sublime:

*Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,*

Sublime for Wordsworth, emanates within the vast expanse of the landscape and melds with the faculties of human imagination. He refuses to see nature as a calamitous force that must be feared or struggled against. Nature is a comforting abode —of which man is a part:

*In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.*

The lyrical ballad reveals Wordsworth's displeasure against the highly invasive industries that were slowly destroying natural landscapes across Europe.

P.B. Shelley views nature as a beautiful but powerful force and unlike Wordsworth, does not mistake its beauty for benevolence. He frequently highlights the destructive potential of nature. In *Mont Blanc*, he ponders :

*Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—
Thou many-colour'd, many-voiced vale,
Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
Fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams: awful scene,*

The icy Alps, as seen in P.B Shelley's '*Mont Blanc*', are also a recurring element in Mary Shelley's writings. Her oeuvre, rife with striking descriptions of nature, exposes deep connections with the sublime, from the simpler Lodore gardens to the colossal Arctic scenes in *Frankenstein*. Shelley's '*The Last Man*' eerily foreshadows the current Covid predicament in which the world has found itself. The dystopic, empty world whose population has been wiped out by deadly epidemics is a direct result of catastrophic human-nature relationships. Nature is seen as hitting back at human arrogance and dominion over a realm man should have respectfully left alone. Even though no explicit scientific claim has been made in this regard, the origins of the coronavirus are being increasingly linked to environmental destruction. Ecologists around the world are echoing Shelley's contention that nature can — and will decimate human populations if our natural disturbances continue.

In '*Romanticism and Ecology*', a special issue of '*The Wordsworth Circle*', Jim McKusick similarly contends:

"Much Romantic writing emerges from a desperate sense of alienation from the natural world and expresses an anxious endeavour to re-establish a vital, sustainable relationship between mankind and the fragile planet on which [we] dwell. " (McKusick, 2009)

The term ecology had not entered the vernacular but its seeds had been planted.

Critiques of Romantic Environmental Sensibility

Wilderness is a paradox, argues William Cronon in his provocative essay, '*The Trouble with Wilderness, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.*' The major thrust of the essay is its vehement critique of the ecological tendency to idealize wilderness, an idea propagated by British romanticism. The defining feature of wilderness is – untainted by human activity and yet, it remains quite profoundly, a human creation. Cronon locates Romantic longing for nature in the maddening hubris of the urban city. Both rural and urban landscapes then work to benefit the bourgeois. The pen wielding, mostly male romantics, escaped from the debilitating effects of their worldly responsibilities and found refuge in nature. Moreover, it was not so much the actual landscapes which featured in romantic nature writing but the virtual landscapes mirroring romantic writers' desires of a world unfettered by human moral obligations.

Romantic view of nature, he opines, falsely conditions us to believe that we can somehow undo our past and return to the unworked natural landscape that existed before we started leaving our marks on the world. Cronon's major reservations arise from what he deems to be a problematic binary created by the romantic sublime wilderness. The binary which splits humans and nature into mutually existent ways of being. This binary is often expressed in the romantic notion widely held by many environmentalists that wilderness is the last place unblemished by human civilization. This line of thought is based on fallacious comprehension of nature, and our place in it. One that eventually creates forces antagonistic to conservation.

Western conservationists, by glorifying beautiful landscapes, which exist only in the imagination of romantics, divert attention from the deeply flawed human attempts to salvage natural environments. Journalist Mark Dowie, working with indigenous people displaced as a result of conservation projects, substantiates Cronon's theory with examples of the Miwoks of Yosemite and the Maasai of eastern Africa in his book '*Conservation Refugees*'.

Dowie, in a rather piercing tone, states:

“So, the removal of aboriginal human beings from their homeland to create a commodified wilderness is a deliberate charade, a culturally constructed neo-Edenic narrative played out for the enchantment of weary human urbanites yearning for the open frontier that their ancestors “discovered” then tamed, a place to absorb the sounds and images of virgin nature and forget for a moment the thoroughly unnatural lives they lead.” (Dowie, 2011)

Further, romantic writing is seen as serving to secularize Judeo-Christian values – marking the place of worship not within a mere human construction but God’s construction, nature itself. And not arising from any sort of ecological consciousness. Environmental scientists who claim to be atheists also admit to have felt emotions tantamount to religious awe when in the presence of wilderness—a fact that testifies to the success of the romantic project.

Romanticism And The Rise Of Ecological Awareness

Jonathan Bate's *'The Song of the Earth'* and Dewey Hall's *'Romantic Naturalists, Early Environmentalists'* serve as counter-narratives to these critiques. The former manages to cover all major nature writing found in English Romantic tradition from Frankenstein's monster and John Clare's birds' nests to Wordsworth's rivers and Keats' seasons. The book is at once an essential history of environmental consciousness and an impassioned argument for the necessity of literature in a time of ecological crisis.

Citing Keats' *'Ode to Autumn'*, he writes, “In order to read it livingly in the age of ecocide we must begin with the knowledge that we have no choice but to live with the weather.” In doing so, self becomes part of the ecosystem. The human figures in the ode achieve ‘fellowship with essence,’ a phrase borrowed from Keats' *'Endymion'*, often associated with the Romantic ideal (“I live not in myself, but I become / Portion

of that around me,”). Keats also invokes the rich pastoral tradition of eighteenth century Europe, admiring a simple but economic mode of production in nature.

It is noteworthy that the ode challenges two of Cronon’s main arguments; one that romantic writing has created a binary between humans and nature. Second, that romantic appreciation of nature is a passion of those who have themselves never worked the land to create a living.

Bates, however, is concerned with neither. For him, the aesthetic value of romantic nature writing can singlehandedly bring about major paradigmatic shifts in our ecological understanding. He sums it up as follows:

“ The universal rights of nature cannot effectively be declared in a systematic treatise; they can only be expressed by means of celebratory narrative. They require. . . a Romantic riot of sketches, fragments and tales—narratives of community, reminiscences of walking and working, vignettes of birds and their nests, animations of children and insects and grass.” (Bates, 2000)

To put simply, literary pleasure, the greatest of which is found in Keats’ daffodils, Tennyson’s charmed sunsets and in Shelley’s magnificent mountains, paves way for environmental concern.

Dewey Hall, on the other hand, brings to fore William Wordsworth’s influence on late-nineteenth-century environmentalists like Octavia Hill and John Muir, and the contemporary national parks movements in Britain and the United States. Hall terms William Cronon's position of nature being a cultural construct as ‘postmodern bandwagon’. He firmly believes Wordsworth’s early environmentalism to be foregrounded against twenty-first-century climate science and ecology. Wordsworth's interest in meteorology as seen in ‘*A Description of the Scenery of the Lakes*’ is a laudatory example of scientifically informed romantic writing. Wordsworth's observations on the prevailing weather conditions are recorded in the book. He grants agency to the weather in creating the picturesque setting, with observations on how 'the character of the landscape is affected' by climate. Moisture gives a green hue to the

land and contours the hillsides whilst heavy rainfall creates 'repulsive' scars in the form of erosion. Wordsworth's geophysical and meteorological ideas that further prove him to be 'an aspiring Romantic naturalist'.

Hall lists instances of proto-environmentalist responses to industrial projects by romantic poets such as Wordsworth's poem 'On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway'. His words are a scathing indictment of the Kendal to Windermere railway project of 1844 :

Is then no nook of English ground secure

From rash assault?

This is in direct contradiction to the claim made by critics that romantic writing is simply the rhapsodic celebration of nature and not an ecologically conscious form of writing.

Towards an Intermediate Approach

Having covered an eclectic bunch of ideas on the connections between literature-nature, or more specifically British Romantic Literature and current ecological practices, this essay does not seek to push for any one line of thinking. Instead, it argues for building a more culturally, literarily and environmentally synthesized approach based on all arguments offered above and also the one that could not be included.

Instead of becoming over defensive because they challenge what is considered a glorious period in English literature, critical perspectives emerging from the significant but nonetheless problematic relationship between romantic writers and nature should be engaged with to build a more enhanced eco-critical perspective. Literature and nature are both culturally contingent, hence, bound to reflect foibles of human society. Romantic writing, from Wordsworth and Coleridge to Byron and Shelley, does betray their socio-cultural positions, privileges and resulting values. Though it is not entirely as negative an attribute as Cronon makes it to be. It might precisely have been the

privilege of the romantics that brought scenic landscapes and the imminent threat being faced by them into mainstream discussions.

I also vehemently believe that Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Blake and the Shelleys were driven by certain ecological ethos. Their works, more often than not, display proto-environmental anxiety. The anxiety felt by romantic writers for nature articulated a powerful and prescient vision of human integration with the environment that influenced later conservation movements and is still relevant to today's major environmental challenges. The significance of romantic poetry and literature in modern ecological studies, thus, cannot be downplayed.

Yet, it is also vital to establish the fact that despite their broad similarities, romantic writers and poets also represent a brand of people with drastically different viewpoints. It would be inaccurate to club them all together and link the whole of Romanticism with ecology. In the words of Ralph Pite, "Doing so often leads to oversimplifications and confusion, in that Romantic poetry may be used "to support any number of different [and one might add mutually contradictory] versions of ecology."

However, because this essay is run by a trust honouring two most celebrated romantics, we can simply conclude with a stance on their contribution to the environment; P.B Shelley and John Keats' romantic writings are most certainly linked with modern ecological consciousness and practices. At the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, the swaying cypress trees and the swathes of blue wildflowers seem like nature's own reciprocatory tribute to the poets. The beautiful, almost sacrosanct image of their resting place brings to mind Shelley's elegy for Keats, 'Adonais,' which I will quote with a slight modification :

*They are made one with Nature: there is heard
Their voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
They are a presence to be felt and known*

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