

When I have fears: Romantic poetry as support in the climate crisis

A loss of biodiversity, wildfires, long droughts, poorer water quality and eco-anxiety are some of the fear-inducing effects that young people will experience in adulthood due to climate change. Facing this calls for support that I believe can be found in Romantic poetry. We ‘enjoy’ poetry because it seems to share and recognise our own acute feelings on the page, meaning that ‘enjoying’ poetry is finding support.

Nature inducing fear is integral to the sublime, a concept that the Romantics obsessed over and illustrates ‘how hideously / [nature’s] shapes are heaped around!’¹ Edmund Burke thought the sublime was terrifying because it threatened human existence², meaning that young people may see the Romantic intersection between nature and fear as a parallel to growing up with the threat of global warming.

This experience angrily divides generations, which Greta Thunberg demonstrates:

‘...the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you’³.

But it also creates a sense of camaraderie amongst young climate activists, through a shared sense of fear. Thus, identifying these exact same feelings of fear in Romantic poetry, with chilling relevance, makes Romantic poetry more enjoyable to young people, allowing them to extend their community past their parents’ generation, finding support in the feelings of the Romantics.

¹ Shelley, P. B. *Selected Poems: Shelley*. Poetry Library, Penguin.

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/sublime> (accessed 19.4.22)

³ <https://www.carbonindependent.org/119.html> (accessed 8.4.22)

Byron was deemed ‘social, sociable and worldly⁴’, but poetically, ‘a prophet crying in the wilderness⁵’, which is true of his poem *Darkness* (1816). Written after the Tambora explosion of 1815 that killed 10,000 people caused ‘the year without summer⁶’, *Darkness* imagines a scenario where ‘the bright sun was extinguished’.

The fear of being powerless against the sublime occurs as ‘the icy earth / Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air⁷’. Suddenly, people have been plunged into a situation where they are at the mercy of the earth’s deterioration, one that humans can’t even track as the earth travels ‘blind’. The frantic verb ‘swung’ corresponds to the lack of guidance and structure that the survivors experience. Even as they ‘look once more into each other’s face’, the earth darkens until ‘all was black’, to demonstrate how fear becomes all-consuming.

Yet instead of resignation, Byron describes the human tendency to fight nature relentlessly:

And others hurried to and fro, and fed

Their funeral pyres and look’d up

With mad disquietude in the dull sky⁸

We can clearly picture the ‘chaos’ of self-preservation as people ‘, but the ‘hurrying’ appears futile, only functioning as an outward show of hope. Young people may identify in this the dwindling amount of time that we have to reverse our actions on

⁴ Bygraves, S., ed. (1999). *Approaching Literature: Romantic Writings*. Open University Worldwide.

⁵ Bate, J. (2010). *English Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mount-Tambora> (accessed 3.4.22)

⁷ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43825/darkness-56d222ae1b> (accessed 25.3.22)

⁸ *ibid.*

the environment. This could even be compared to another of Thunberg's most famous speeches:

'Our house is on fire... we are less than 12 years away from not being able to undo our mistakes.'⁹

Byron and Thunberg's ideas are linked by a fear of surviving while everything around you dies. For young people, this is a stark reality, but the resonance of the same feeling across time is comforting, if not reassuring that their fear has been shared.

Although young climate activists are often scorned, I still believe that anyone, regardless of age, has a right to fear the future stability of their world. This sense of facing something apocalyptic while alone, is captured by Keats in *When I have fears that I may cease to be* (1819), where the sonnet form communicates the way we love something more, when we know we shall lose it.

Keats offers recognition to young people in the final lines of his poem:

... -- *then on the shore*
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
*Till love and fame to nothingness do sink*¹⁰.

By repeating the adverb 'when' throughout – 'When I have fears', 'When I behold', 'And when I feel' – the reader anticipates the concluding time phrase 'then', which Keats delays until the middle of the twelfth, thus illustrating that so many aspects of the narrator's life, are impaired by fear. This may seem like a brutally real description to young people, but it may also make them value the natural world around them

⁹ <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2019/12/02/address-at-davos-our-house-is-on-fire-jan-25-2019/> (accessed 8.4.22)

¹⁰ Keats, John. *The complete poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

more, by realising that values we are taught to esteem, such as 'love' and 'fame', disintegrate around the narrator, leaving them as a last man on earth figure.

Darkness acts as a 'prophetic cry' to explore a world where our fears come true, a world beyond the last man:

... *but two*

Of an enormous city did survive,

And they were enemies...

...—*saw, and shriek'd, and died*—¹¹

Byron bleakly focuses on the absence of life and people with the use of a '-less' suffix in adjectives such as 'manless', 'herbless' and 'sailorless'. Even humans have been eradicated from the world that has become a collection of losses, something which could be reclaimed by young people to prove and validate their fears around global warming.

Poetry is universal, but there are some aspects of it that resonate more with particular groups of people. Each group will have their own unique fears and when we experience fear, we want to be told that our fears will never come true. This sort of rhetoric however, is incompatible with the climate crisis. In the midst of political conferences, speeches, protests and debates, maybe what young climate activists need, is support that is removed from the whirlwind of modern life. Romantic poetry provides this with its prophetic recognition of fear surrounding nature and morality, telling us that the only way to eliminate fear completely, is through action.

¹¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43825/darkness-56d222aeeee1b> (accessed 25.3.22)

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