

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832

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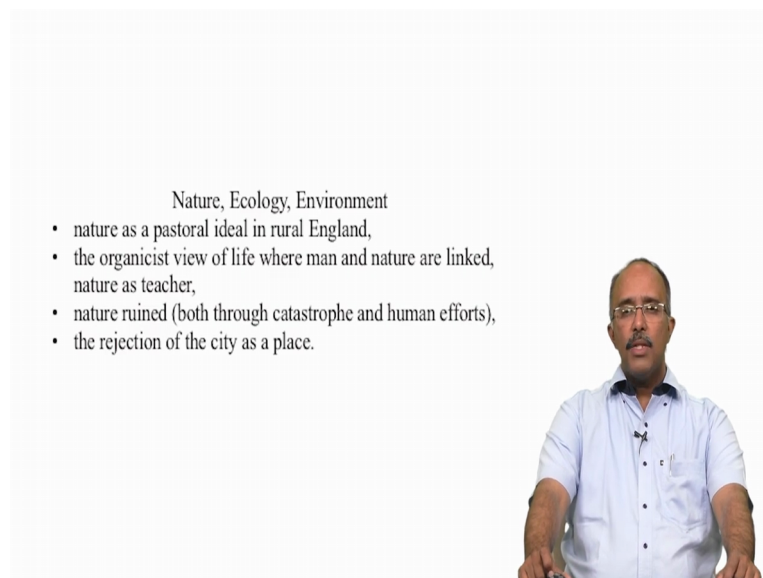
Department of English

Introduction: Nature and the Environment

Hello everybody, we are continuing our lessons on English Romantic writers, this is Pramod Nayar of the Department of English, The University Hyderabad. We are now dealing with Romantic poetry and our subject for today's lesson nature and the environmental ecology with specific reference to poetry. Let us 1st look at how the English Romantic authors dealt with the environments and nature, it is a commonplace thing to say that English Romantic authors specially the Wordsworth era were interested in nature as something ideal, pristine, but contemporary authors specially John and others have discovered that a certain environmentalism runs through the generation of authors which have now been utilised contemporary eco-critical critics as well.

In other words, while we have always seen the Wordsworth generation as fascinated by nature, worshipful of nature, eco-critic see present-day and environmentalism as having found its original moments in the Wordsworth generation as well.

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Nature, Ecology, Environment

- nature as a pastoral ideal in rural England,
- the organicist view of life where man and nature are linked, nature as teacher,
- nature ruined (both through catastrophe and human efforts),
- the rejection of the city as a place.

The slide features a video inset of Professor Pramod K Nayar, a man with glasses and a light blue shirt, standing and speaking.

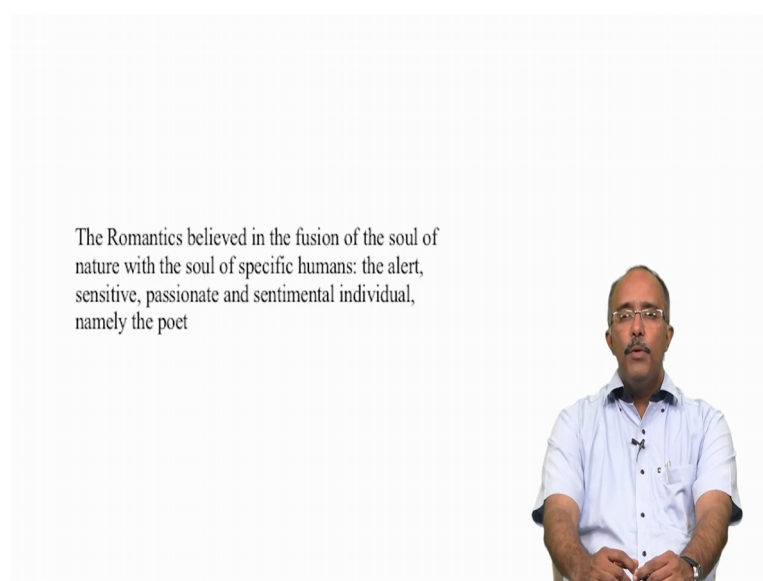
Nature as a Pastoral ideal in rural England is a common theme, and if you recall what you have said about the preface to the lyrical balance, a certain organicist view of life is also being promulgated man and nature are linked. There is no way you can distinguish human life from the setting in which that life is read and if we think about contemporary eco-critics

that is precisely the point that several of them are making. Then there is idea of nature as teacher and you will see this in some of Wordsworth's more famous packages being the prelude well when he has in some ways violated nature, nature has taught him a lesson, it is the more famous example here would be of the boat stealing incident where after he has done this heinous crime so to speak.

Wordsworth the speaker finds himself being chased by a mount, this is the famous prelude. Then there is a team of nature ruined, this could be nature ruined through catastrophe and poems like "The Ruined Cottage" is a great example of this or through human efforts. Then there is of course a pet theme of the rejection the city as a place, so the Wordsworth generation particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge saw suburban and rural England countryside basically as a place of ideal beauty, ideal humanity, and consequently they rejected London and the cities as unworthy of their attention. So this is a huge divide that they create between London as a place of civilisation or commerce and England's countryside which is the better space of Englishness which has more humanity.

And you will recall we are like resolution of independence and the leech gather and the old couple and Becker, where Wordsworth would say that good ideal human beings are to be found only in the countryside. So there is this division between nature and culture, city and country which the Romantics put in place as they spoke about the environment.

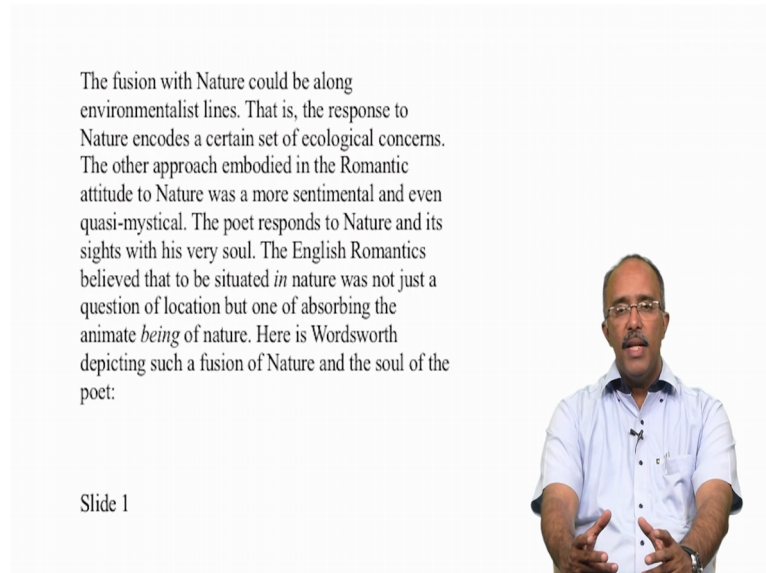
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Then of course there is a romantic belief in the fusion of the soul of nature with the soul of the human, it is not that all humans are connected to nature, Wordsworth very strongly

believe and we will see examples from Tintan Abbey that the more sensitives of the human such as poets are far more connected to the soul of nature itself. So the alert, sensitive, passionate and sentimental individual such as a poet is the one who is connected to nature.

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The fusion with Nature could be along environmentalist lines. That is, the response to Nature encodes a certain set of ecological concerns. The other approach embodied in the Romantic attitude to Nature was a more sentimental and even quasi-mystical. The poet responds to Nature and its sights with his very soul. The English Romantics believed that to be situated *in* nature was not just a question of location but one of absorbing the animate *being* of nature. Here is Wordsworth depicting such a fusion of Nature and the soul of the poet:

Slide 1

The fusion with nature, this oneness is this organic connection with nature could be along environmentalist line that is the response to nature encodes a certain set of ecological concerns. The other approach embodied in the Romantic attitude to nature was a more sentimental and which we have just mentioned and sometimes even quasi-mystical. The poet response to nature and insights with his very soul in other words, not all humans can respond to nature that way, it is quite a different level of consciousness and sensitivity and sensibility of course for anybody to respond to nature. So it is only the poet who has that level of connection where his consciousness connects to nature. The poet response to nature and its sights with his very soul

So the English romantics believed that to be situated in nature was not just a question of location, the person who is situated in nature must also be capable of absorbing the animate being of nature, let us take an example here. Here is Wordsworth depicting such a fusion of nature and the soul of the poet, coming up on your slide next is a set of lines from lyrical ballots from the poem lines written in early spring.

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Slide 1



This is what Wordsworth says, to have fair works did nature link, the human soul that threw me ran.. It is a famous line, to have fair work with nature link the human soul that threw me ran. Look at what he is saying here, nature's work connect to the human soul in the poet, me is the speaker so nature's link to the human soul is through me but also that natural response to me, nature soul responds to me and appeals to me. Here is another famous example coming up on your next slide from Tintern Abbey, please read those lines carefully. And as you read it you will recognise the echoes of the previous one which we have already just looked at from lyrical balance.

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O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!
And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.




As Wordsworth speaker stands in the midst of woods of near a river or mountain, he acknowledges that something around him the nature around him is imbibed by him, gets into his soul. And look at what he is saying, the half extinguished thought, perplexity, the picture of the mind revives again he says, with many recognitions deemed and faint and somewhat of a sad perplexity the picture of the mind revives again. While here I stand not only with the sense of pleasure but with pleasing thoughts that in this moment there is life and food for future yes. Wordsworth is of course gathering material for future nostalgic as we can say we put it, but something else is happening here.

It is not just collection of memories for the future, Wordsworth sees his consciousness as been forged in the lap of nature. It is when I am in nature that I have certain kinds of thoughts that it is kind of infusive process where I absorb the sense of place.

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A sense of place must inform human consciousness, which sustains the poet in the present and in the future, suggests Wordsworth. Indeed the growth of the boy into a man, or the growth of the imagination is measured in terms of the increasing connection with Nature. Karl Kroeber in his reading of Wordsworth has proposed this line of argument: that in *Prelude* Wordsworth 'defined, dramatized, and evaluated' the power of the imagination according to its relationship with the power of nature.

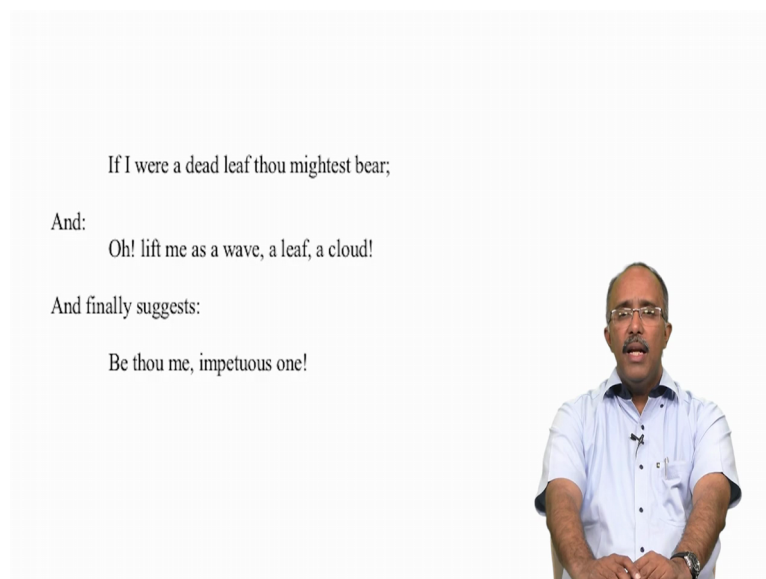


The sense of place must inform human consciousness, which sustains the poet in the present and in the future that is what Wordsworth is saying. So it is not just the question of consciousness when I am located in nature but what I have learned absorbed from nature will stand me in good state sometimes in the future as well that is as I assimilate absorbs nature, it transforms my consciousness for future life and living. The growth of the boy into a man or the growth of the imagination is measured in terms of the increasing connection with nature. And Wordsworth would spend a lifetime mourning the fact that as you grow up, the sensibility which you had as a child, the joy that you perceived very well in nature is lost.

The distinguished of Karl Kroeber, in his reading of Wordsworth has proposed that in prelude Wordsworth defined, dramatised and evaluated the power of imagination according to his relationship with power of nature that is how you have evolved as a poet, how your imagination has evolved is entirely dependent upon how you have learned to deal with nature. So what Wordsworth is doing is Wordsworth is saying, here is a poetic imagination and here is the child, for the child to become a poet he needs to assimilate nature and modify his imagination, so imagination is the effect of having imbibed nature in the certain way

This is the organicist view of the link between nature and human mind, human soul or human consciousness, and this view is common towards Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley among the Romantic. Take Shelley for instance, you would think that Shelley's view on nature should be quite dramatically opposed to the Wordsworth but it is not quite so. In for example the famous Westwind, Shelley would describe himself as a leaf in the wind, coming up on your slide now 3 famous lines from Shelley's Oh to the Westwind.

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First, if I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear, and then he says list me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud. And he finally suggests, be thou me impetuous one. Now what is what is going on here, look at the 1st one, if I were a dead leaf you will bear me from place as if the leave will flow around, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud.

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One notes that Shelley is not drawing parallels between the poet and nature: he is telling us that the poet is *nature itself*, that nature and the poet constitute a dynamic relation where the poet has assimilated the soul of nature.

Critics have argued that there occurs a 'reevaluation of place in the sense of landscape [in Romantic literature] was also connected with the romantic recovery of a sense of the divine as manifest in the more-than-human natural world' (Rigby 2004: 53). For poets like Coleridge, however, there was a deeper ambivalence. In poems like 'Dejection', Coleridge would say that one cannot always look to Nature for inspiration and consciousness, and one has to search within. Keats would demonstrate the link between humans and nature in sensual terms.



But I would draw your attention to the 3rd one, be thou me impetuous one, so what is Shelley doing here? I am suggesting to you that Shelley is not drawing parallels between the poet and nature that I am like nature no, that is not what he is doing what he is saying is the poet is nature itself. So Shelley is not like Wordsworth is saying, the soul of nature flows through me and then the poetry is produced, no that is not what he is saying. What Shelley is saying is, I am nature itself, the poet is nature itself, please pay attention to the last line once more. Be thou me impetuous one, he does not say be thou like me, he does not say let me be like you, he is saying be thou and he is addressing nature the West wind. You be me, you become me impetuous one.

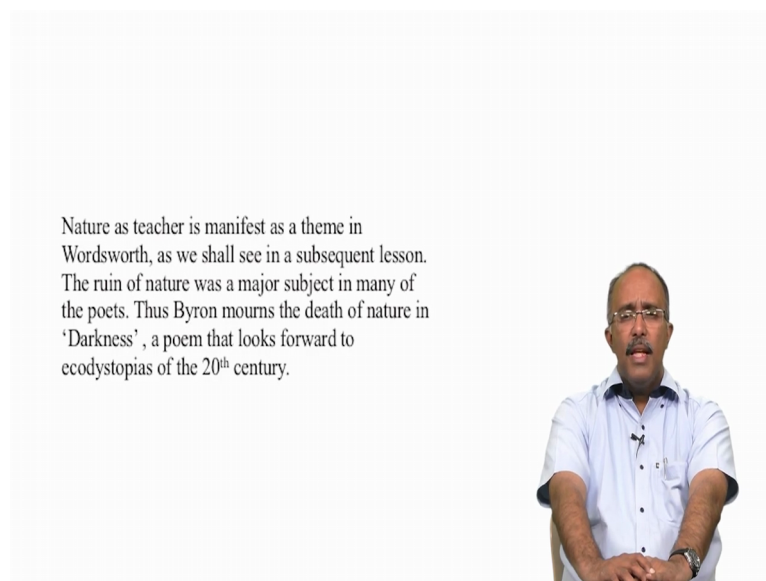
In other words what he is saying is, I have assimilated the soul of nature and you are me now, nature and the poet are one Dynamic unit because they each have the same kind of soul. Critics have argued that there are certain revaluations of place in the sense of landscape in Romantic literature, but it is also connected to the Romantic recovery of the sense of divine, what do we mean by this? In Ribbi's argument which I have just quoted, nature is not just a backdrop like the curtain behind me or at the setting which I am saying all this to you, there is this sense of space, place, the landscape around as something more than human as something approaching and approximating to the divine..

So for poets like Coleridge there was a deep ambivalence and I will come to that in a minute, we want to emphasise this where Wordsworth said, my thoughts, my consciousness, my soul comes when I sit in the lap of nature, Shelley says we are already so fused, you are me. So

the Shelley at no point is drawing parallels between poet and nature, instead what he is saying is the poet is nature itself, the nature and the poet constituted dynamic relation where the poet has assimilated the soul of nature.

For Coleridge this has a certain problem, he is little more ambivalence towards nature than Wordsworth is. In poems like dejection An Ode Coleridge would say that one cannot always look to nature for inspiration, one cannot always hope for the poet to assimilate nature and develop the imagination or consciousness, one has to search within. Keats would demonstrate the link between humans and nature in more sensual terms.

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Nature as teacher is manifested as a theme in Wordsworth as we shall see in subsequent lessons and little more detail. The ruin of nature was also a major subject in many of the poets, thus Byron mourns the death of nature in a poem like darkness, and it is up that looks forward to the eco-dystopias of the 20th century. So having looked at nature as quasi-mystical and nature as a source of inspiration and as I just said nature as catastrophic (12:52).

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Environmental attitudes to Nature appear in the form of not only the divinization of Nature as seen above but also in the anger at the technologisation and industrialization of England – which brought in the machinery and the factory – and the social reorganisation of landscape. The loss of the common grazing lands and the open spaces to landlords became the subject of many poems, especially those by John Clare and George Crabbe.

Here is John Clare's pertinent critique of the privatization of common lands in *The Village Minstrel*:

Slide 4



Let us downturn to environmental attitudes to nature appear in the form of not only he devinization of nature which we have just seen but also in something else. The English romantic approach to nature had an environmental strand as I have already mentioned in the beginning of the today's session, and there was considerable amount of anger with technologisation and industrialisation of England which bought in the machinery and the factory. The social reorganisation of the landscape as a result labour, poverty, but most of all as we will see in the case of John Clare the poet, the technologisation and modernisation of England led to the loss of common grazing land. So open spaces were taken away by landlords, enclosures, fencing and walls were built which bounded open nature, open landscape back to the lands.

And people in John Clare were very upset by this because what they saw happening was a loss of nature in its truly open sense. Here coming up on your next slide is John Clare's critic of such privatisation of common lands, this is what John Clare would say in 'The village Mistrel', please read those lines on the slide now.

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There once was lanes in nature's freedom dropt
There once was paths that every valley wound
Inclosure came and every path was stopt
Each tyrant fixt his sign where pads was found
To hint a trespass now who crossd the ground
Justice is made to speak as they command
The high road now must be each stinted bound –
Inclosure thou art a curse upon the land
And tasteless was the wretch who thy existence pland.



There once was Lanes in nature freedom dropt, there is once was paths that every valley wound, enclosures came, enclosures spelt in the old sense with an 'I'. Enclosures came and every part was stopped, each tyrant fixed his sign where pads was found to hint a trespass now who crossed the ground, justice is made to speak as they command the high road now must be each tinted bound, enclosures thou art a curse he says, look at the kind of anger. Enclosures thou art a curse upon the land and tasteless was the wretched who thy existence pland.

What is the tone you get from John Clare? John Clare is riding out of anger, and anguish, at some point he says there was freedom and you could walk along this path, you could take that lane then enclosures came and the paths were stopped because what was a path through the common land was now no longer apart because it was no longer common. So the land which were something all of us could traverse through became somebody's property so they fenced it, they blocked up the access and they converted the path into private paths, and therefore he says the high road now much be each stinted bound. And please recall what he had said about the chartered streets of London in Blake's famous poem. And then he says, enclosures thou art a curse upon the land because the good places the commonplaces have all been taken away

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Clare is mourning the disappearance of the country and nature due to greed and so-called civilisation. The anger against cities in Wordsworth (and Blake before him) are also instances of the critique, implicit and often explicit, against industrial modernity that takes humanity away from Nature.



What is Clare doing? Clare is mourning the disappearance of the country, he is mourning the disappearance of the nature due to greed and so-called civilisation the anger against cities in Wordsworth and Blake before Wordsworth are instances of the critique, implicit and very often explicit as we just saw in the case of Clare against industrial modernity that takes humanity away from nature

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The sense of Nature as a special state, as pristine and uncontaminated is a specific construct in the Romantics' discourse. Nature is treated as the exact opposite of human culture. The binary, however, has been questioned by numerous scholars in the 20th century.

Contradictions in such representations of Nature as pure and pristine have been noted. The distinguished critic, Marjorie Levinson (1986) has noted that, in his famous Tintern Abbey poem, Wordsworth chooses to ignore the charcoal industry around Tintern except as a very minor reference. (Wordsworth refers to the 'wreaths of smoke', which he then attributes to 'vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods'.) He also ignores the vagrant dwellers in the Abbey itself, choosing, instead, to focus on the picturesque landscape as a clean/clear space devoid of the human presence. It is this erasure of the economic and social contexts of the Abbey that Levinson marks as a major flaw in Wordsworth's celebrated poetry of nature.

What Levinson says of Wordsworth has been stated by Raymond Williams of 17th century poetry as well. The landscape is celebrated by ignoring the labourers on it. Moreover, the materiality of labour is also erased when Wordsworth 'naturalizes' it:

Slide 5



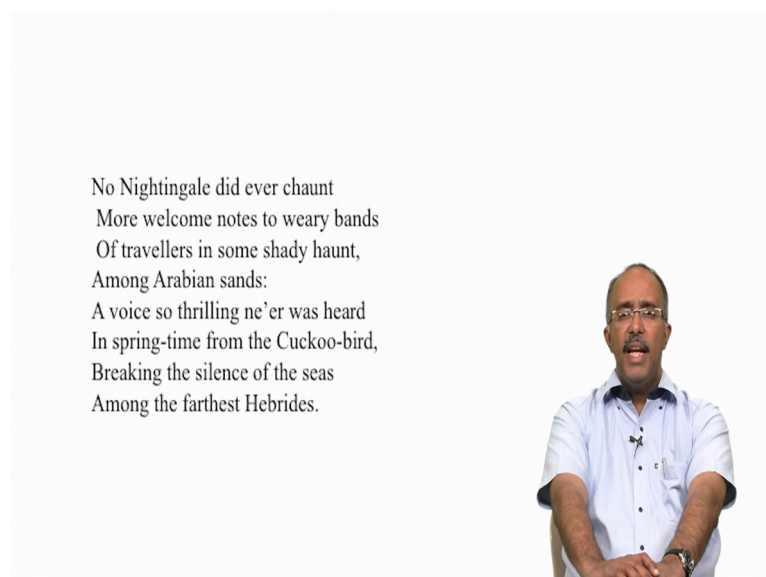
Having moved through the divine nature, having moved through environmentalist nature and what we just saw the political economy of nature which annoy people like John Clare. The romantic also saw nature as a special place, pristine and contaminated, no way that its purity can be taken away and the prolific construction in romantic discourse. So nature is treated as

I said in the beginning of the today's talk is treated exact upon the human culture this binary has been questioned by numerous scholars in 20th-century.

Contradictions in such representations of nature as pure and pristine have been noted the distinguished critic, Marjorie Levenson has argued that Tintern Abbey Wordsworth actually chooses to ignore the charcoal industry around Tintern except as very minor reference. If you recall, Wordsworth refers to the Wreaths of smoke which he then, he looks at the Wreaths of smoke and then he says it must be coming from vagrant dwellers in the house Wordsworth. Actually there was a charcoal industry right outside Tintern Abbey which Wordsworth does not mention in the poem he ignores the vagrant dwellers in the Abbey as well choosing instead to focus on the picturesque landscape would as a clean clear space devoid of the human presence.

Now the point is, it is the creation of the economic and social context of the Abbey that Marjorie Levenson marks as a major flaw in Wordsworth celebrated poetry of nature. What Levenson says of Wordsworth has been stated by Raymond Williams of 17th-century poetry as well that the landscape can only be celebrated by ignoring the labourers on it. And the materiality of the labour is also erased when Wordsworth naturalised it. As an instance, take a look at the next poem coming upon your slide.

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No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt, more welcome notes to weary bands, of travellers in some shady haunt, among Arabian Sands. A voice south thrilling never was heard in springtime from the cuckoo bird, breaking the silence of the seas among the farthest Hebrides. Now this

kind of idealisation this kind of representation of nature as something pristine and pure is an unattainable one, why? See the very distinction between the nature and culture is not a distinction available in nature, it is what we humans do it that means the binary nature and culture is itself the effect of the culture. So what you need to understand is that the Romantics were constructing very specific views of nature..

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Further/Recommended Reading

Kroeber, Karl. *Romantic Narrative Art*. 1966. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1969.

Levinson, Marjorie. *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.

Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

Rigby, Kate. *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2004.



I have in this session talked about the quasi-mystical near magical one, the angry John Clare whose discourse of nature is to say that those common lands have all been taken away and as a result there is no common nature any longer. The reserve place of certain kind of nature which says this is how nature is perfect and we draw our inspiration our imagination from it as we will see in subsequent lesson or two, that is not something that was devoid of politics, and people like Coleridge were not very happy with this idealisation of nature.

What you do need to understand here is, the quasi divine role of nature, nature as teacher, nature as angry but nature as poets this difference, we have looked at 4 or 5 modes of representing nature in the English Romantic, these are also proto-environmentalist in the sense they give a certain status to nature which you see 20th century and environmentalism is doing, thank you.