

## English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832

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### English Romantic Poetry – 2 Nature, the Environment and Ecology Keats and Byron

(Refer Slide Time: 0:15)

English Romantic Poetry - 2: Nature, the Environment and Ecology

Keats and Byron



Like the other Romantics Keats also embodies a quasi-spiritual attitude towards Nature, as well as a Coleridge-like organicism. Like Shelley, he saw the creative mind and aesthetic consciousness as tied in to a sense of Nature, drawn from Nature.

Ode to a Nightingale

Here nature is embodied in a bird. As bird and the poet's song merge, Keats suggests the merging of Nature and art, or Nature and the creative mind. The surrounding setting stimulate the imagination, and even when he cannot see, he can still see with his mind:

Slide 1



Hello everybody, in this, the final session on the nature, the theme of nature and environment and ecology, we will look at two poets Keats and Byron, you had looked at Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelly, will look at is two points in one session today, like the other romantics, Keats also embodies a quasi-spiritual attitude towards nature, he also has a certain Coleridge like organicism, like Shelley he saw the creative mind and aesthetic consciousness is tied into a sense of nature, drawn and drawing upon nature itself.

In Ode to a nightingale one of his famous poems, nature is embodied in a bird, as bird and the poets song merge, Keats, suggest the merging of nature and art or nature and the creative mind. The surrounding settings stimulate the imagination, and even when he cannot see, he can still see with his mind, that is even when nature is not there, right there is a physical presence in front of him, he can see with this mind insight, here is slide one for you, which you has a passage from Keats.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:23)

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the bough,  
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
And mid-May's eldest child,  
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
The murmurous haunt of lies on summer eves.



I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, nor what soft incense hangs upon the bough, I cannot see he says, this is of course ode to a nightingale, where he says I cannot see the flowers, I cannot see anything, but I also cannot see what soft incense hangs upon the bough Keats is a famous cenesthesia but in embalmed darkness, guess each sweets. Wherewith the seasonable month endows the grass, the thicket, and the fruit tree wild, white hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine, fast fading violates covered up in leaves and mid mays eldest child, the coming musk rose, full of dewy, the murmurous haunt of lies on summer eves.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:03)

Nature's song, as embodied in the Nightingale's music, becomes the means to transcend the everyday and the fragility of human life.

I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,  
Though the dull brain perplexes and  
retards:



Nature's song is embodied in the nightingale's music becomes the means to transcend the everyday and the fragility of human life, for Keats therefore nature is means of escape, the fragility of human life is too much, you will see some of these records from a Wordsworth here, Wordsworth will also see that the world is too much with us, so we need to get away from it and the only way you can escape is by going into nature and this what Keats to see, I will fly to thee, this is from nightingale, I will fly to thee, not charioted by a Bacchus and its pards, but in the viewless wings of poesy, though the dull brain perplexes and retards.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:44)

The poet acquires perfect happiness when listening to this song. The nightingale's song, is the poet's only connection to the external world,. But the poem also has a third aspect: fancy. Keats aligns the three – the bird, the poet and the imagination., or fancy.  
But there is also an ambiguity here. The merger with the nightingale or its song can lead to self-annihilation, suggests the poet, especially in the last stanza:

Slide 2



The poet acquires perfect happiness than listening to the song. The Nightingales song, is the poets only connection to the external world, but the poem also has a third aspect, fancy, Keats

aligns, the three categories here, the bird, the poet and the imagination or fancy. But this also an ambiguity here like we said in the case of Coleridge and Wordsworth another, they set an amount of ambiguity. The merger with a nightingale or the song lead to itself annihilation, to lose one self and he says, so in the last lines of the in the famous poem, coming up on your slide now the conclusion to Ode to nightingale.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:21)

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.  
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
In the next valley-glades:  
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?



Forlorn, the very word is like a bell, to toll me back from thee to my soul self, adieu, the fancy cannot cheat so well as she has famd to do deceiving elf, and then of course the rather plaintive elegiac note where he says, thy plaintive anthem fades past the near meadows, over the still stream, up the hillside and now tis buried deep in the next valley glades, then he will ask those famous rhetorical questions, was it a vision are waking, dream? Fled is that music do I wake or sleep?



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The sound from Nature drives everything in the first half of the poem, and the second half shows how it all goes away. In fact a 20<sup>th</sup> century critic termed the poem an account of the "turmoil" of "disintegration," of "patterns flying apart, not coming together". There is also another dimension to this poem on Nature, the natural process of suffering, age and sorrow:

Slide



The sound from nature, the song from the nightingale bird drives everything in the first half of the poem, in the second half, it shows how it all goes away. In fact, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century critic has termed the poet an account of the turmoil of disintegration, of patterns flying apart not coming together, that everything becomes to collapse and this I think is an important trading because it shows ambiguity at the heart of the Keats of the representation of nature, there is also another dimension to this poem on nature, the natural process of suffering, age and sorrow, here it is on your slide now, this is Keats.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:32)

The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few sad, last, gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes



The weariness the fever and the fret. Here, where men sit and here each other groan, or palsy shakes a few sad, last, gray hairs, where youth grows pale and spectre-thin and dies, where

but you think is to be full of sorrow and displayed is leaden-eyed despairs, where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, there is of course a suggestion that this is about ageing and death, contextual readings by people who work at the intersection of medicinal literature I have argued that this is actual description of hospital ward, where people heres, others groan and cry and die and there is despair and people are grow spectre thin before the times.

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There is a clear ecoconsciousness in a poem such as 'The Grasshopper and the Cricket' where Keats writes:

Slide:



But that is one few of it, but there is a, as you can see a clear ambiguity in Keats representation of nature, there is a clear eco-consciousness in a poem such as the grasshopper and the cricket, that is our next theme and our next poem, look at Keats, except from grasshopper and the cricket.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:32)

The poetry of earth is never dead:  
When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,  
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run  
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;  
That is the Grasshopper's – he takes the lead  
In Summer's luxury, - he has never done  
With his delights; for when tired out with fun  
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant heed.  
The poetry of earth is ceasing never.  
On a lone winter evening, when the frost  
Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills  
The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,  
And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,  
The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills.



The poetry of earth is never dead, when all the birds are faint with the hot sun and hide in cooling trees, a voice will run from hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead, that is the grasshoppers, he takes the lead in summers, luxury, he has never done with his delights, for when tired out with fun, he rests at ease beneath some pleasant heed. The poetry of this is ceasing never, on a lone winter evening, when the frost has wrought a silence from the stove there shrills, the cricket song, in warmth increasing ever and seems to one in drowsiness half lost, the grasshoppers among some grey grassy hills.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:07)

In 'To Autumn', however, Keats undertakes a sleight of hand. Instead of speaking of the inevitable nature of seasonal change, he presents the seasons themselves as having slowed down (Steve Curran's argument):

Slides



It is about labour, but in autumn, Keats undertakes a sleight of hand, instead of speaking of the inevitable nature of seasonal change, he presents the seasons themselves as having slowed down, this is Steve Curran's rather innovative argument, that is, it is not a question of the change of seasons, but the seasons themselves are slowing down, here are the lines from 'To Autumn' on which Steve Curran makes his key argument.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:35)

Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers



Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook, spares the next swath and all its twined flowers.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:42)

Curran writes:

In this stark vision the sensate world of sound and sight is not an arena of recuperative health but exactly its opposite, a hospital ward where, whether the patient be old or young, decay is the common denominator; and those who tend the afflicted, unless they can maintain their scientific detachment, experience 'leaden-eyed despairs' (28) at the inefficacy of their intervention.

Slide



This is what Steve Curran says about to autumn, in this stark vision and I am quoting, in the stark vision the sensate world of sound and sight is not an arena or recuperative health but exactly its opposite and this is what I also mention it in passing about to nightingale, a hospital ward where, whether the patient be old or young, decays the common denominator and those who tend the afflicted, lest they can maintain their scientific detachment, experience leaden eyed despairs at the inefficacy of their intervention, this is the key argument and I think an innovative one like I just mention in few minutes ago, at the

intersection of medicine and literature, that the world are, the sensate world of sound and sight is not necessary of joy, of recuperation and health, it is the exact opposite, it is about death and time.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:33)

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies



Look at what he is saying and have that back on our slide, here where men sit and hear each other groan, where palsy shakes a few, said, last grey hairs, where youth grows pale, and spectre thin and dies.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:47)

Painkillers and opiates in Ode to Nightingale  
(leading to drowsy numbness, the swallows  
twittering like a sort throat – a subliminal pun,  
perhaps, on swallowing – in 'To Autumn', are  
instances.



Steve Curran notes that painkillers and opiates in ode to nightingale, where so many of those leading to drowsy numbness, the swallows twittering like a sort throat, a subliminal pun, I

think, perhaps, on swallowing in to autumn are instances, so Keats has a lot of therapeutic, palliative, alleviating, medication described through his text and Steve Curran, you know, reading is a saturation in reading, notes the list of painkillers and opiates in ode into nightingale, so the drowsy numbness is actually an opiates being described, and opiates affects being described and the reference to the swallows which twitter in the skies at the end of ode to nightingale critics like Allen Bewel in the study of romanticism and colonial disease.

How argued that might just be a reference to Keats its own sort throat, it is a subliminal pun or swallowing, the swallows that twitter in the sky and the swallowing the throat which has been hampered by an infection.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:47)

In Autumn

This is Nature of a tropical kind, with excessive heat and excessive ripening:

Slide



So there is a lot of disease in this ones, so if you turn out to this famous poem in autumn, ode to autumn, this is a nature of a rather tropical kind, I am following here Allen Bewels very convincing, very persuasive reading, nature is a tropical kind with excessive heat and excessive ripening, here are the rhymes from autumn, which indicate the Bewel might have a clear argument with them.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:09)

fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells



To fill all fruit with ripeness to the core, to swell the gourd and plump the hazel shells with a sweet kernel to set budding more and still more later flowers for the bees until they think warm days will never cease, for summer has oer-brimmd their clammy cells.

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For Bewell, this is less about ripening than over-ripe, on the verge of decay. The clammy could also be a reference to sweaty states of the human form, in the grips of fevers. When the poem ends, it is life waiting to be extinguished:

Slide



For Allen Bewel, this is less about ripening than about over ripening and over ripening, which is on the verge of decay. The clammy could also be a reference, he says, to sweaty states of the human form, a person gripped with fever. When the poem ends, it is life waiting to be extinguished, towards the end of it. I have already mentioned the idea of subliminal pun in the swallows, this is the conclusion to the famous auto mode.



(Refer Slide Time: 9:52)

Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.



Among the shallows, borne aloft or syncing is the light wind lives or dies and full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn, hedge crickets sing and now with treble soft, the red-breast whistles from a garden croft and gathering swallows twitter in the skies, as we would say it is about life and nature dying out.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:11)

Byron

His fantasy/dream poem, 'Darkness' describes an Armageddon or apocalypse. It opens thus:

Slide



Let us now turn quickly to Byron, specifically his fantasy dream poem darkness which describes an Armageddon or apocalypse, this is not, please understand a wonderful cherry nature, its nature catastrophically damaged, this is the way it opens.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:28)

The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars  
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,  
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth  
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;



The world turns upside down in the wake of a disaster:

Slide:



The bright sun was extinguished and the stars did wander darkling in the eternal space, rayless and pathless and the icy earth swung blind and blackening in the moonless air, by this darkness from whose opening up ciders this line up on your slide is a poem about extinction basically the end of the world as we know it.

The world has turned upside down in the wake of a disaster, this is what you would say about what happens after the disaster, after the natural calamity, coming up on your slide more excerpts from darkness.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:01)

And others hurried to and fro, and fed  
Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up  
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,  
The pall of a past world; and then again  
With curses cast them down upon the dust,  
And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds shriek'd  
And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,  
And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes  
Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd  
And twin'd themselves among the multitude,  
Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food.



Social entropy sets in as well, and as Nature  
collapses the social order, fighting for food and  
fuel also collapses.:

Slide



The world was void,  
The populous and the powerful was a lump,  
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—



Here is the description of what can be thought of as a social entropy, that there is chaos following earthquake and we know this right, after an earthquake or any natural disaster, the social order collapses, so Byron is doing something interesting, Byron is speaking about the catastrophic state of nature, which is reflected, which is mirrored in the problem of social entropy, people are running up and down as he calls it mad it disquietude on a dull sky, curses cast them down upon the task and gnashd their teeth, people are terrified, everything is kiosk, people were slain for food.

So when nature collapses, social order collapses, people are fighting for food and fuel, this is what he says, the world was void, the populous and the powerful was a lump, seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless and lifeless.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:55)

Additional/Recommended Reading

Susan J. Wolfson (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*. Cambridge UP, 2001.  
Porscha Fermanis. *John Keats and the Ideas of the Enlightenment*. Edinburgh UP, 2009.

Nicholas Roe (ed) *John Keats and the Medical Imagination*. Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017.

Drummond Bone (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*. Cambridge UP, 2005.  
Jerome McGann. *Byron and Romanticism*. Ed. James Soderholm. Cambridge UP, 2002.



Now Byrons darkness has an entirely different tone from what we have seen so far, Byron is actually speaking about the situation, end of the world scenario, which is more common to eco-dystopias in the 20<sup>th</sup> -century and 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature, if you know eco-dystopias films, like the book of Eli, or all those science-fiction films the world is ending kind of thing, the day after tomorrow and anothers.

Natures collapse because of climatic change or something like that, when climate change, of course, the world collapse is and the world collapse is at a social level as well, using it in any number of eco-dystopias novels from Argonaut Atwood to J.J Ballard, Octavia Butler as where the world has more or less collapsed, Byrons poem is speaking precisely that language, so I would suggest that we think about Byrons darkness, his famous poem darkness and

anticipating the eco-dystopias of the 20<sup>th</sup> -century that when nature collapses the world level will also collapsed.

It is an important ecological argument, it says, Byron says that we are a life, we flourish as a civilization only when we have a suitable sustaining environment in which we can live, when that sustain an environment collapses we collapse, so Byron is actually anticipating many of the 20<sup>th</sup> -century authors that there is an intrinsic link between the so-called glory of human civilization and the natural setting in which the civilization is built, clearly this is not a traditional, romanticizes view or romantic view of nature, Byron has more or less anticipated 20<sup>th</sup> -century eco-consciousness and eco-dystopias. Thank you.