

Romanticism and Nature

Romanticism and nature are almost synonymous. The quintessential Romantic lyric suggests a mystical relationship with nature; the poet has the ability through his imagination and his experience in a natural setting to transcend his everyday life and troubles and to connect with a spiritual essence or something divine that then allows him to re-conceive of his life, enabling him to overcome the deadening of life he has confronted. While that summary suggests many of the key ideas and relationships involved in British Romanticism's engagement with nature, this unit, and this subunit in particular, demonstrates some of the nuances and complexities of the role nature plays in different Romantic authors' art.

Perhaps no poet and no poem epitomize Romanticism's mystical view of nature more than William Wordsworth and his poem "Tintern Abbey." As Professor Clarke's lecture notes describe and as we saw in Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and in *The Prelude* (subunits 3.2.1 and 3.2.4, respectively), Wordsworth based his poetry on the idea that it should be written in a natural language that speaks to and reflects common human emotions. Those emotions are most readily called forth by our experiences in nature. As Dr. Lowe's lectures further detail, "Tintern Abbey" represents an important pattern present in a number of Romantic lyrics. The speaker encounters or remembers a setting in nature – in this case, Wordsworth reflects on seeing the decayed abbey in its natural setting after an absence of five years – and then exploring his reactions to the setting, he meditates on the relationship between himself and nature in general. Wordsworth recalls how his memories of this setting have renewed his life when he has lived in the city, but he also begins to realize that it is his more adult relationship to nature – rather than his youthful one when he unconsciously felt at one with it – that is more significant, for it provides him with a moral connection to humanity and to some spiritual essence greater than humanity. As important, he stresses that it is not simply nature's influence on him, but equally his perception of nature – the role his consciousness and his imagination play in producing this experience: "of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear,--both what they half create,/ And what perceive" (105–107). Here is the first complication in the romantic worship of nature. For the Romantics, nature does not act on a passive human mind. Instead, the human mind is at least as active in creating the sublime experience of nature as the material reality of nature itself.

This idea is developed more in Coleridge's poems in this unit. In "The Eolian Harp" (subunit 3.2.2), a central figure for the relationship between nature and the poet in romantic thought, Coleridge reflects on nature as being that "one Life within us and abroad" (27) and emphasizes how, in moments of tranquility, his mind and soul become empty vehicles or instruments for nature and its inspiration to play upon: "And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,/ That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of All?" (45–49). In "Dejection: An Ode" and "Frost at Midnight" we see more of the dialectic between the imagination's role in creating perception and nature

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guiding the soul. In “Dejection,” for example, the speaker of the poem laments the lack of effect nature has on him because of his malaise. At the end of the first stanza, he hopes that “Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed, / And sent my soul abroad, / Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give, / Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!” (17–20). Where the sounds of the winds have moved him in the past, allowing his spirit to soar as they awe him with the might of nature, he now desperately longs for nature to have such an impact on him. As he notes at the end of the second stanza, in his depressed state, he can “see” but “not feel” the beauty of nature, and as the third stanza emphasizes, it would be “vain” to hope for relief from nature and for its “outward forms” to renew his life, when “The passion and the life, whose fountains are within” (46) is deadened. For one suffering dejection, nature is no soothing balm, because life and passion come from within. As the fourth stanza puts it, “we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live” (47–48). We see in the opening stanzas of “Dejection” the flipside to the romantic celebration of nature – the romantic emphasis on subjective experience, individual consciousness, and imagination. If our experience derives from ourselves, then nature can do nothing on its own. Beginning with the fifth stanza, Coleridge suggests that there is a power – personified joy – that allows us to reconnect with nature and for it to renew us and that comes both from within and from without: “the spirit and the power, / Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower / A new Earth and new Heaven” (67–69). That reconnection with nature will renew the world for us. The speaker in the next stanzas reflects how he has lost this connection, as his “afflictions bow me down to the earth” (82) and his “viper thoughts” have stolen his “shaping spirit of Imagination” (86). Alluding to the image of the eolian harp from his other poem, Coleridge speaks of the wind’s inability to raise him out of his depths.

“Frost at Midnight” oscillates back to nature’s innate potential to shape the mind and the imagination, which is also the central theme of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, even as it hints at the limits placed on that power by the individual’s perspective, attitude, or experience. The speaker reflects on the frost settling on the fields around him during the night as he watches his child calmly sleep. He comments on the motion of his own thoughts; like the flame he watches, his spirit “By its own moods interprets, every where / Echo or mirror seeking of itself, / And makes a toy of Thought” (21–23). Thought becomes a toy as the “idling Spirit” attempts to make the world conform to it. The speaker then recalls his youth and the feeling of being trapped within school, which makes him then think of his child. Unlike the speaker, who “was reared/ In the great city, pent ‘mid cloisters dim, / And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars” (52–54), the child “shalt wander like a breeze / By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags / Of ancient mountain” (55–57). He will thus have steady access to “that eternal language, which thy God/ Utters” (61–62) and which “shall mould” the child’s spirit. In his hopes for his child, Coleridge’s speaker echoes the vision of nature that Wordsworth puts forward in his poetic considerations of his youth and the role played in the development of his imagination and self. However, that vision is contrasted with his own experience, particularly with the limitations of the “cloistered” life of the city. “Frost at Midnight,” then,

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reiterates the romantic hope in nature's redemptive spiritual power, even as it offers a more melancholic view of how that power may not be accessible to all.

Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" parallels these developments but perhaps goes even further. Dr. Lowe provides an account of the poem's movement in subunit 3.2.4: the speaker goes from being engaged by the bird's beautiful song to contemplating his own misery and his desire to escape the pain of living to his accepting the bird's song as some sort of consolation to finally wondering whether this encounter has happened at all. As with some of the other poems in this subunit, the speaker's encounter with nature reinvigorates him. He begins in a state of "numbness" as his "heart aches," but the poem shifts quickly to state that the speaker does not "envy" the nightingale's "happy lot"; rather, the speaker is "too happy," or overwhelmed, at hearing the bird's singing. In the second stanza, the speaker imagines that by becoming inebriated he might "fade away" with the nightingale and escape this world. Here, we see a temptation of the romantic view of nature – the possibility that nature will simply become an escape from the social world of human interactions as well as human pain and suffering. In the third stanza, he would "quite forget" exactly what the nightingale has never experienced, "The weariness, the fever, and the fret" (23) of human life, due to illness, due to our own thoughts, and due to the passage of time. In the fourth and fifth stanzas, poetry – referred to as "the viewless wings of Poesy" in line 33 – takes the place of alcohol and allows the speaker to imagine himself with the nightingale, flying away. While he cannot see the flowers that they would pass together, he can imagine them. This exemplifies another central romantic trope or idea, the power of the imagination to create a psychological reality. The sixth stanza finds the speaker reflecting on his desire for death, and he proclaims that death seems even more enchanting with the ecstatic singing of the nightingale. In contrast, in the seventh stanza, the nightingale and his singing were not born to die, for they (or other nightingales and their songs) have soothed humans since ancient times. With the eighth stanza, his imaginative journey with the nightingale ceases – "the fancy cannot cheat so well" (83) – and he finds himself back with his "sole self" (82). As the music of the bird disappears, he concludes by wondering whether it was all a dream. Like the other poems in this subunit, "Ode to a Nightingale" explores the possibility of an encounter with nature reinvigorating the speaker. Like the other poems, but perhaps to a greater extent, this poem emphasizes the role that the imagination must play in that reinvigoration, but in doing so, it also plays up the frailty of the vision that is created, leaving the speaker and readers uncertain about the reality of the experience and, perhaps, in the same place as we were when the poem began. In this way, nature potentially becomes yet another illusory dream of happiness, reconnection, or revitalization.

Summary

- Many Romantic poems narrate a speaker's encounter with nature, which then leads to reflection on the relationship among the self, imagination, and nature.

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- Often in these romantic poems, through the power of the imagination, nature becomes the source of a mystical experience of oneness with the world and sometimes with humanity.
- William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" epitomizes these tendencies, but the poem also begins to suggest the complications through its emphasis on the role of the imagination and on the poet's different experiences within nature as he ages.
- Coleridge's "Dejection" and "Frost at Midnight" further develop the potential of nature to revitalize the speaker, and these two poems also foreground that one's attitude, mood, and/or experience must enable one to experience nature's enlivening power.
- Similarly, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" explores the possibility of nature as a resource for combatting depression and for escaping human life, but ends by questioning the very reality of the experience it narrates, thus troubling any faith in the imagination's power or nature's power.

References

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