

Images of Slavery in Cowper's "Sweet Meat has Sour Sauce, or The Slave-Trader in the Dumps"

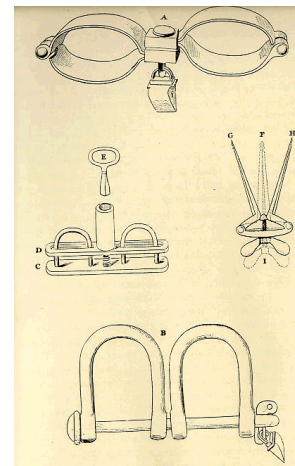
While slavery was a common practice in England throughout the 18th century, the Romantic period also bore witness to the beginning of the abolitionist struggle, a recurring motif in the literature of the time. One such example of abolitionist literature is William Cowper's poem "Sweet Meat has Sour Sauce." While abolitionist poems abound during the Romantic period, Cowper's poem called my attention because of its detailed account of slave trading practices and implements. In fact, I that believe that the engravings that were used to illustrate many of the travel narratives and slave accounts of the Romantic period heavily influenced the details in Cowper's poem and, in spite of its mocking tone, I also believe that these details are precisely what make the message of the poem resonate with the reader.

The beginning of Cowper's poem gives the reader a glimpse into the changing state of the slavery trade at that particular moment in British history: the House of Commons had passed a bill that would restrict the number of slaves that could be transported in a single ship at the same time, thus jeopardizing the earnings of slave traders (Wu 17). As a consequence of this bill, the slave trader in the poem recognizes "I am going to sell off my stock" (9) which consists of, as the reader later on realizes, of all the implements he uses to inflict pain and suffering onto slaves. The list the slave trader gives us is amazingly detailed:

Here's supple-jack plenty, and store of rattan
That will wind itself around the sides of a man
As close as a hoop round a bucket or can,
Which nobody can deny.

Here's padlocks and bolts, and screws for the thumbs
That squeeze them so lovingly till the blood comes;
They sweeten the temper like comfits or plums,
Which nobody can deny.

When a Negro his head from his victuals withdraws
And clenches his teeth and thrusts out his paws,
Here's a notable engine to pen his jaws,
Which nobody can deny.



Handcuffs, leg shackles,
thumb screws and
speculum (Oris; Dow 67)

The list goes on until the end of the poem, but the question that I kept asking myself as I read was: How can a writer who has apparently never been on a slave ship have such a detailed knowledge of the implements used to torture slaves? As I started looking through some engravings related to slavery, it became apparent that Cowper must have been exposed to at least some of them, and incorporated this information in his anti-slavery poetry. For instance, the drawing on top shows many of the instruments described in the poem, and "Slaves below deck"

(included below) gives a clear depiction of the deplorable conditions that slaves had to endure while being transported from Africa to the colonies.

To conclude, while I do agree with critics such as Suvir Kaul, who argues that the “jocularity” (248) in Cowper’s poem detracts from his anti-slavery message and instead “emphasizes the dehumanization of the slave trader as much as the commodification of the enslaved Africans” (247), I also think that Cowper’s deliberate attention to detail forces the reader to acknowledge the horror that was inherent to the slave trade. In other words, while the tone of the poem might be mocking or ironic or even playful, there’s no escaping the mention of “the chains for the neck,” (line 11), “a cat with nine tails” (line 11) or the bolts and screws for the thumbs that he mentions later on in the poem. From this perspective, the refrain, “which nobody can deny,” makes a lot more sense: Cowper is in fact telling his readers that these are the undeniable facts of slavery, much like the drawings, paintings, and engravings of the Romantic period also confronted the public with this harsh reality.



Slaves below deck.

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23 September 2010

Ecocentrism in Clare's "To the Snipe"

Though a truly ecocentric perspective may be impossible when everything is necessarily filtered through a human consciousness, Clare's attempt in "To the Snipe" is remarkable. Throughout, Clare explicitly compares human perspectives on beauty and value with the needs and preferences of the snipe and the other wetland inhabitants. Indeed, contrasting ecocentrism with anthropocentrism seems to be the primary device in the poem.

Clare places this dichotomy front and center, with the first stanza describing the snipe as a "Lover of swamps / The quagmire overgrown," places were "fear encamps" (1-3). These are forbidding places to humans, areas inhospitable to human habitation. It may be to this that Clare refers to by "fear encamps." The terms swamp and quagmire have indelibly negative connotations to us: swamps were believed to breed disease via fumes, and today we use the term quagmire to refer to an especially bloody and difficult war. But these places the snipe loves; they are his home.

Continually throughout the poem, Clare uses this juxtaposition of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism to highlight the difference in perspectives. The snipe's home is made not of solid ground, but of grass that "Quakes from the human foot / Nor bears the weight of man to let him pass" (6-7). The wetland is both fragile and forbidding, both breaking under the weight of humans and working to exclude them, a characterization both prescient and demonstrative of Clare's ecological awareness. Contrasted to this, the very next lines present this place not as an impassable wasteland, but from an ecocentric perspective as a place where the snipe "alone and mute / Sitteth at rest / In safety" (8-10).

Clare's juxtapositions get closer, more immediate, layered and interwoven within lines and images. The hills where the snipe lives are made of "mud and rancid streams / Suiting thy nature well" (15-6). The two contradictory perspectives are overlapping, moving closer, and even beginning to become interdependent. The "stagnant floods" of the marsh, objectionable to humans, are exactly why the marsh is attractive to the snipe, because that is where and why "security pervades" (31-2). Neither "man nor boy nor stock" will come to this desolate place, which is why the fowl live here (35). Even the anatomy of the bird is presented from these antithetical perspectives. The snipe's bill is "Suited by wisdom good / Of rude unseemly length doth delve and drill / The gelid mass for food" (18-20). Clare is layering the perspectives: first we get ecocentric (the bill is well-suited), then anthropocentric (it is ugly to us), and then a return to ecocentric (it is well functioning).

Another way Clare contrasts these two perspectives is by the language of solidity versus instability. The swamp will not bear the tread of humans, but the solid ground is where the hunters and their hounds prowl. "Tis power divine" that allows the water fowl to "at ease recline" in this place of instability, calmly riding the waves in a storm (49-51). This image of the calm fowl at home in the unstable swamp is juxtaposed with the "firmer ground where skulking fowler goes / With searching dogs and gun" (55-6). The snipe's nest is "Mystic indeed," so secure that it is on the edge of materiality, so well-concealed as to challenge the perception of it as existing in a physical form. No one gazes upon the nests but the sky itself. The very choice of the snipe as subject reinforces this. Snipe is the root of sniper, which designated a skilled marksman because of the snipe's reputation as extremely elusive prey.

Though the poem's primary mode is the close juxtaposition, even interpenetration, of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, Clare leaves no doubt as to which perspective he privileged. Much like Wordsworth, he characterizes his encounter with nature as a student-teacher relationship. Unlike Wordsworth, he is much more concrete and material in what the object of that knowledge is. He thanks the snipe for teaching him to see the wetland from an ecocentric perspective: "Thine teaches me / Right feelings to employ / That in the dreariest places peace will be / A dweller and a joy" (85-8).

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Hannah More's "Cheap Repository: The Story of Sinful Sally. Told By Herself"

Summarily, More's "Cheap Repository" is about and from the perspective of a young girl named Sally and the sinful path that ultimately leads to her death and possible damnation. For morbid subject matter, the poem is in contrast written in a sing-song and short-line stanza manner. This enables the poem to be simple but pointed, and Hannah More uses the story of the simple girl in a manner that is simple in order to reach the most women. She would be selling this obviously to a literate public (the note under the title reads, "Price one halfpenny), but the short lines allow for both country and city (London) women to be able to understand her message.

Primarily More's message is a plea and cautionary tale about what happens to young "green" (naïve) girls who stray towards a life of sin. The poem itself switches between third and first person as Sally's life progresses from her first brush with men and vanity, until her ultimate demise from Venereal disease. More is not trying to sugar coat the matter; she even references Sally's "cloak of scarlet", which the footnote explains as a reference to Revelation 17: 3-6. Revelation 17: 3-6 explains the naming of the Whore of Babylon and can be seen merely as a reference to Sally's tainted status from being a country girl, as the lines "When Sir William met me skipping, / And he spoke me on the Green; / Bid me quit my cloak of scarlet, / Blamed my simple kersey gown" suggest (More ll. 43-6). Or, the reference to the "cloak of scarlet" is foreshadowing of her fate, since Revelation 17: 16 goes on to say "these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire", which echoes Sal's deterioration, "Here with face so shrunk and spotted / On the clay-cold ground I lie; / See how all my flesh is rotted— / Stop, oh stranger, see me die!" (More ll. 137-40). It is clear to More and it should be to her reader that a life obsessed with the material and specifically personal vanity is self-destructive.

More is a part of a larger feminist movement which wants to create a public voice and representation for women, but her ideas stray from most in that she believes British women (country and city, alike) should strive to "expand the feminine sphere and female social power within the framework of Christian duty and self-improvement" (Mandaglio). The emphasis in the statement is the Christian duty. Through her poem, More reveals a direct path between vanity and materialism and female ruin, therefore she still wants to promote the feminine voice, but only in a manner that will support the current and long-standing ideals of female purity and chastity.

I also tried to discover if there was a source for naming her character "Sally of the Green", from which I only found reference to an African-American, children's slave song which has a refrain of "Green Sally Up, Green Sally Down" (SongMeanings and Coojams). The subject matter of the two sources is not similar, but there is a consensus of "green" meaning a young (naïve) girl. So, she is "Sally of the Green" presumably because no one warned her of the dangers of vanity and desire, as material desire will "Turn a mistress to a rake" as More's poem insists. Since a "rake" here refers to a prostitute, the previous connection is made because Sir William tempts Sally (which through her degradation just becomes 'Sal') away from her

husband with “presents” and “ribbons gay”, and then she turns to prostitution when she is left alone, poor in London (More ll. 49-50).

More is trying to create shock and guilt in her readers to elicit moral, Christian behavior in the quest for equal rights under the law.

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9-30-2010

Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Book V [The Arab Dream]

In Book V of *The Prelude*, the speaker wishes that books, which contain the best ideas created by man, could survive forever, even though mortal men and the earth itself “must perish” (21). Wordsworth repeatedly uses language that suggests the act of creation is like being a god, shaping the world how we want, giving it meaning, creating something better. Books are “things worthy of unconquerable life” (19); Shakespeare and Milton are “labourers divine” (165); a book is a “poor earthly casket of immortal verse” (164). It seems that the divine ideas in books *should* trump the reality of obliteration, “and yet man, / As long as he shall be the child of earth, / Might almost ‘weep to have’ what he may lose” (23-5).

The poem soon finds a suitable champion of the imagination to carry the great books beyond the apocalypse that destroys the world and all other marks of human civilization. The speaker’s friend, as he sits reading *Don Quixote* by the ocean, falls asleep and has a dream that he is in “an Arabian waste...sitting there in the wide wilderness / Alone upon the sands” (71-4). He sees a man mounted on a camel and dressed as “an Arab of the Bedouin tribes” (78), and yet he knows this man is Don Quixote, whom Romantic fascination with mysticism and Eastern culture has somehow transmogrified into an Arab. Quixote carries a stone and a shell, which he says are books. The first book is Euclid’s *Elements* – “The one that held acquaintance with the stars / And wedded man to man by purest bond / Of nature, undisturbed by space or time” (104-6) – while the other seems to be a conglomeration of many books that encompass humanity’s striving for ideals and divinity: “The other that was a god – yea, many gods, / Had voices more than all the winds, and was / A joy, a consolation, and a hope” (107-9). The last image of Quixote is of “him riding o’er the desert sands / With the fleet waters of the drowning world / In chase of him” (135-7).

Wordsworth interprets *Don Quixote* to mean that the knight’s mad imaginative world is better than the real world, that the people around him are all cynical, doing things the wrong way, and that the dreams of Don Quixote are actually a higher way to live. Read in this way, it seems that many passages in the book confirm Quixote’s imaginative wisdom because some of the people he meets are real life versions of romantic stories: the desperate romances, the unspeakably beautiful women, the people who go off and live as shepherds and vow they will die for love. The book’s message seems to be that romantic moments are everywhere as long as we apply imagination to the world. Wordsworth reads *Don Quixote* as a book that champions the imagination over the dull realism of ordinary life, which is why his Arab Quixote has a fighting chance to preserve the books and ideas created by man’s imagination even as the physical world perishes.

There is a problem with this reading, though. Although Wordsworth thinks that in “such a madness, reason did lie couched” (152), Cervantes in the end does not have such faith in madness and imagination. *Don Quixote* concludes with the final illness of the knight. As he lies dying he realizes he has been mad all along, changes his name to Alonso the Good, and disavows all his deeds and things in which he has believed. I myself read *Don Quixote* in a Romantic frame: I felt sorry for him, but also thought he was right, and I hated the characters who insult his ideals and try to trick him. As a reader I was hurt by the ending: how could he possibly express hatred for his own beloved ideals? We have to realize that in its original 17th-century context, readers expected Quixote to be mocked because he is a social deviant. Wordsworth is an example of how the Romantics stretched the meaning *Don Quixote*, interpreting it based upon their love of the imagination. Is this right or wrong? It does probably not reflect Cervantes’ intention, but it is wonderful that this one book can open up many realms of experience and possibility, depending upon who reads it and when.

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Annotation 5
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I'm getting closer to land, but still caught in-between the land and the sea, exploring the implications of what those borders mean. I'm reminded of the Anglo-Saxon term "mearcstappa," meaning border-stepper (or border-rover), and how this term specifically applies to sailors, or seriously angst-ridden beach combers.

Charlotte Smith was one such beach-comber, but the borders seemed more of a barrier to her than a representation of any particular anxiety in itself. Coleridge's *Mariner*—a man of land in the sea—was also a border-stepper, but he seems to spend much of his literary time on one side or the other. While the sea still holds plenty of potential, I think that the zeitgeist of such potential roams (or rather haunts) the beach.

Maybe, then, this connection to Mary Robinson's *The Haunted Beach* seems obvious. Apparently written shortly after a traumatizing experience involving a neglected dead fisherman on the coastline outside her home (Wu 248), Robinson's poem doesn't just convey a sense of dread, desolation and neglect, but exudes an anxiety driven by what *might* wash up on the shore, and linger there.

The scene Robinson sets at the beginning of her poem serves to blend the spirits of the dead and the body of the murdered mariner with surf-imagery. The first line, describing "a lonely desert beach/Where the white foam was scattered" (1), accompanies "shattered" barks of a rather gothic shed (4) and the "chalky shore" (8), recalling bones. Not the beach of Smith's longing, Robinson's is a place of death intertwined with life. While the derelict shed seems dead enough, "The seaweeds gath'ring near the door" are not (5). But amidst the "chalky shore" in a "lonely desert," Robinson strongly conveys desolation; the seaweeds are a kind of carrion-eater, or maybe even an undead creeper, border-steppers between life and death in their own right.

Significantly, Robinson's specters blend almost indistinguishably with the surf. Before the specters appear, Robinson describes "the deaf'ning roar" of the sea (7), "moaning wind" (19), which is juxtaposed with the spirits' "dismal howlings" (34). The cacophonous aurality of Robinson's poem turns up the amps with bird screaming: "The curlews, screaming, hovered;/And the low door, with furious roar" (38). Despite the rot and stagnation language earlier, nothing seems still or peaceful in this setting. The surf is always in a state of becoming, or accumulation. Rot still applies, but not in a state of peaceful repose. Instead, the sea seems to violently reject any sense of serenity, producing only a barren, salinized "chalky" landscape with desiccated plants and dead bodies. For Robinson, the sea only produces what it has already killed.

Ultimately, the sea produces a mariner's murdered corpse—perhaps similar to Coleridge's (or even the same?)—whose body is isolated in the shed on the beach—the border between the land and the sea, left to rot. The "spectre band, his messmates brave,/Sunk into the yawning ocean" (55)—an aquatic hell-mouth—and Robinson's spectator is left alone to ponder at the border between land and sea; life and death. The murderer remains ambiguous, though as Victoria Machado suggests, the killer may be the personified sea itself. Left to rot in a shed, the *Mariner* is apparently forever locked between land and sea, a silent border-stepper, but still a corpse.

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24 September 2010

Place and Identity within *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*

James Hogg wrote *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in 1824, though he decided to publish it anonymously. Written in Scottish English, Hogg's novel was essentially forgotten by his contemporaries and became valued nearly a century later with an influx of religious fanaticism. Revolving around the ideas of persecution, delusion, likeness, othering, mimicry, and tortured consciousness, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* combines gothic tropes with satire of totalitarian thought as it presents itself as a memoir deeply rooted in local history. Hogg's fixation upon local history reflects his background; he grew up on a small farm in Ettrick, Scotland, which would later become essential to his identity. Nicknamed "The Ettrick Shepard," Hogg taught himself to read and write and left his hometown for Edinburgh to pursue his literary career. Nevertheless, his identity as "The Ettrick Shepard" remained with him and was textually represented within "Ambrosian Nights." Using the notion of "place" to describe a location with personal significance, as well as noting the importance of place to "The Ettrick Shepard's" self-identification, I contend that Hogg encourages us, as readers, to view place as intertwined with identity.

The first sentence of *The Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* references not only local history and tradition, but it also reveals information about Hogg's narrator. The narrator states, "It appears from tradition, as well as some parish registers still extant, that the lands of Dalcastle... were possessed by a family of the name Colwan" (Hogg 3). Hogg's narrator, Robert Wringhim, continues with a lengthy family history, which leads to a tale of his own adoption; he is, in fact, an unwanted member of the Colwan family. The tale of his mother's misfortune bleeds into an encounter with his biological brother who tells him, "My mother's son you may be, but *not a Colwan!*" (Hogg 21). In this instance, being a member of the Colwan family is separated from biology; instead, we are asked to rethink identity in terms of place. As referenced within the first sentence of the novel, Robert had to rely upon local tradition and research for information about his biological family. In order to obtain information about the Colwan family, Robert had to research the place in which they lived, inextricably intertwining identity with place. The use of the phrase, "appears from tradition," paired the admittance of checking parish registers, reveals that Robert had limited knowledge regarding the lands of Dalcastle and the Colwans, essentially othering him and his self-identification as a Colwan. Thus, when one of his brother's friends identifies him as such, he responds, "No, not a Colwan, Sir... not a Colwan, Sir; henceforth I disclaim the name" (Hogg 21). Robert is only forced to verbally disclaim the name of Colwan after another character identifies him as such, demonstrating a distinct difference between the

way in which others use biology as a means to identify and the way in which individuals, such as Robert, choose to be identified by place.

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Annotation #5

Byron's *Manfred*: Rewriting *Hamlet*

In 2003 I saw a regional theater production of *Hamlet* that made me giggle uncomfortably. The normal moody Hamlet was a bright, witty college guy caught in the midst of a bellicose dictatorship. I was the only one in the audience laughing at Hamlet's jokes. The morning after the production I went to a discussion with the play's director and lead actor, and most of the audience members had the same question—what were they thinking making Hamlet funny? The director and actor said they made the choice deliberately. Since the rest of the characters were murderous Machiavels, they wanted to show Hamlet doing the best he could under horrific circumstances. They highlighted the totalitarian feel with Soviet-style uniforms, a gravedigger that was no longer funny with his backlog of bodies, and Polonius as Heinrich Himmler figure. All characters except Gertrude, Ophelia, and Hamlet carried side arms or rifles. Hamlet as the nervous comic relief was disconcerting, but it worked.

Previous to watching this performance, I knew Hamlet was smart and witty, but I'd never thought of him as funny. And then last week I read Byron's *Manfred* and I realized that for the past 200 years we've been stuck with Hamlet as some version of the Byronic hero.

Byron clearly and deliberately borrowed from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when writing *Manfred*. If the poem's epigraph from *Hamlet* 1.5 isn't enough, Manfred's first speech clearly signifies on Hamlet's language. Reflecting Hamlet's famous soliloquy (3.1), Manfred discusses the difficulties of "slumbers [that] are no sleep / But a continuance of enduring thought" (1.1.3-4). Manfred also laments that "grief should be the instructor of the wise," (10) just as Hamlet wants his grief over his father to move him to action (2.2.546-605). Moreover, Byron continues his borrowing in the way he later has Manfred contemplate suicide and the meaning of life. Manfred appeals to witches and spirits for wisdom, as does Hamlet to the ghost of his dead father. Although *Manfred* takes a Faustian turn, Manfred plays off Shakespeare's most famous character while exhibiting the traits of the Byronic hero: self-critical, highly intelligent, mysterious, emotionally conflicted, arrogant, charismatic, rebellious, and world weary.

Perhaps more importantly, Byron's *Manfred* has also rewritten *Hamlet* retroactively. Byron actually didn't create this rewrite alone. According to Jane Moody, Shakespearean productions changed dramatically at the end of the 18th century, reflecting the shift from a Neoclassical to a Romantic sensibility. In fact, "Almost overnight, a Shakespearean character came to be seen in an entirely different light" as the audiences and critics wanted to see more "character" or insight into personality (41). With *Hamlet*, the transition began in 1783 when Philip Kemble gave the first melancholic performance. In 1814—three years before the publication of *Manfred*—Edmund Kean portrayed a Hamlet that "epitomized the Romantic era's brooding interpretation, a style that actually became known as 'Hamletism'" (Bevington, Welsh and Greenwald 626). Since then, we haven't been able to let go of the Byronic Hamlet. In the 1920s, Hamlet was plagued by post-war "disillusionment and cynicism" (626). In the 1930s and 40s, Hamlet was passionate or artistic. In the 1960s, Hamlet became an anti-hero, rebelling against the establishment with anger and angst. In the 70s, he was sensitive; in the 80s and 90s, he was self-reflective, self-destructive, or self-referential, too smart for everyone else around him (627, 42-45).

As Anne Stiles says, even though we might think we're too smart to be smitten by the Byronic hero, we as a culture fall for him every time. From rock stars like Kurt Cobain to the

latest teenage vampiric incarnation, Edward Cullen, the Byronic hero permeates popular culture. So I guess it's no surprise he also invades the Shakespearean stage. Although Hamlet is fine with his Byronic tendencies, without them he becomes a new and refreshing character that can elicit a few chuckles.

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 25 September 2010

Sunrise/Sunset in Images of Blake's "Little Black Boy"

While William Blake's "Little Black Boy" does appear to reveal certain dichotomous attitudes between white and black, alternate readings reveal more complicated, less clear relationships between Blake's representations of the two races. These complications are further revealed when we understand the poem within the context of its two illustrations, found on the William Blake Archive, one depicting the slaves at sunrise and the other at sunset. The lighter sunset painting on the left seems to reveal only positive connotations about slaves, but the sunset depiction on the right, which is more like the numerous images that follow on the archive, reflects darker hues that reveal complications about Blake's attitudes towards slaves.

The first picture supports the more illuminated, solar reading of the poem, especially the third and fourth stanzas, in which the slave mother explains to her child that the Lord expresses his love through sunbeams. The brightness of the sun in this depiction is so dominant that both the mother and child are illuminated in a heavenly hue that suggests the reception of God's love. Instead of darkening the skin, the sun appears to lighten it in a way that contradicts the simple images of black skin/light soul. Despite this discrepancy, the values expressed in this depiction hold the (en)lightened mother and child in heavenly regard. Everything appears to brighten, as the soul would, with God's touch. Moreover, the heat emanated from this sunrise is not represented as overwhelming and oppressive but warm and comforting. Overall, the image presents an ennobling view of the slave.

While the basic outline of the second image mirrors the first, the distinctly different shading permits an opposing interpretation. Most notably, the mother and child are depicted as much darker in this twilight painting. The sunlight, which is descending behind the water, does not reach the mother and child, who are shaded beneath the tree. It seems that they are dark not because of God's loving rays but because they are denied it. In consequence, their skin resembles the blotchy, dark color of the tree trunk positioned against their backs, perhaps suggesting that they are part of the natural landscape. In this bedeviling twilight hour, mother and child appear more demonic than angelic. With this scene in mind, the interpreter may comprehend the final stanza in a less positive manner. Now Blake appears to place the black boy between the white child and God, insinuating that acceptance of this black child becomes a prerequisite for the white child's entrance into heaven. By this positioning, one could argue, Blake has created a black bogeyman that can deny whites access to eternal salvation. Viewed against the narrative of the poem, this twilight painting enables a more frightening, sublime perspective of the slave.

Neither this nor the conventional interpretation can be confirmed with absolute certainty, and these paintings further illuminate the multitude of readings possible of Blake's poem. The outline of the drawing is comparable to Blake's verse,

while the shading estimates the various interpretations and apprehensions a reader may bring to the text. Regardless of how one reads the poem, however, one must question why Blake chose to express his ideas about race within the context of death and salvation. By transferring a sense of the racial sublime, perhaps he thought to convince us, regardless of our ennobling and/or fearful interpretations of his poem, of abolition's necessity.

Link to Images:

<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/comparison.xq?selection=compare&copies=all&bentleynum=B9©id=songsie.b&java=yes>

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“On the Grasshopper and the Cricket,” by John Keats

I wanted to look at this poem with an ecocritical eye. Immediately the statement “The poetry of earth is never dead” denotes poetry as an intrinsic quality of the earth’s complex ecosystem. The characteristic of poetry is described twice in the poem as “never dead” and “ceasing never”(1,9). This means that the “poetry” is incessantly living, breathing, and expressing a quality of the earth in a mode that can be heard, read, and understood.

The poem continues on to explain that “When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,/ And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run...That is the Grasshopper’s—he takes the lead” (2,3,5). The birds are the first forms of life to express the “poetry of earth.” As they are thought to begin the day’s energy, they eventually tire and must rest in the afternoon. When Keats states that “a voice will run,” the language implies that this is not just a single occurrence, but the “*will* run” tense connotes that this is something that always happens and is expected to continue happening. This natural occurrence is the perpetuation of the “poetry” or the “voice” that the grasshopper takes on after the birds stopped to rest.

The interconnectedness that ecocriticism emphasizes in close readings of literature takes true form in this poem. After the grasshopper is “tired out with fun/ He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed” (7,8). In the same manner that the birds rested under the trees, the grasshopper also finds repose under another plant. The plants in these lines are also contributing to the interdependent system of perpetuating life and the “poetry of earth.” It is here in line 9 of the poem that it is repeated “The poetry of earth is ceasing never.” After the grasshopper has played its part, the last lines of the poem describe what carries on the vitality of earth. The setting of a “lone winter evening, when the frost/ Has wrought a silence” depicts that even the frost in a stark winter landscape had to cease whatever noise there was if a “silence” was to ensue (10,11). At this time “there shrills/ The Cricket’s song, in warmth increasing ever” (11,12). The cricket is the next form of life that continues the “voice.”

The poem, although depicting different instances in perhaps different settings, evokes different microcosms of the ever-functioning ecosystem. The simple links and bonds that are expressed in this literary text are illustrated through language and at the same time referring to the ecosystem being understood as language or the “poetry of earth.” It is through this simple example that shows how poetry, and especially that of the Romantics, has the capability representing the world as a complex system of mutual interdependencies; it is meant for humans to understand the poetry and to see how we are also included. Regarding this, the poem ends with a human’s perception, or “one in drowsiness half lost,” in apprehending the sound of the cricket to seem like that of the “grasshopper’s among some grassy hills” (13,14). To the human perceiver, the “voice” is thus perpetuated. It is perhaps difficult to distinguish between the cricket’s song or the

grasshopper's, and that creates the harmony of the interconnectedness to the mind of the perceiver.

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The Byronic Hero in Polidori's *The Vampyre*

John Polidori's short story, *The Vampyre* (1819), was written as a challenge from one of Polidori's female friends to complete Byron's "Fragment of a Novel," an incomplete story about a mysterious character named Augustus Darvell. It is not surprising then, that Polidori's mysterious character, Lord Ruthven, would possess certain qualities of the Byronic hero. After all, Polidori lived for a short time with Byron and admired him greatly. Possibly, Polidori even modeled Lord Ruthven's personality off of Byron's own personality.

One of the prime examples of a Byronic hero would be Byron's own Manfred, from the dramatic poem, *Manfred* (1817). Manfred is mysterious because he seemingly cannot die and has committed some kind of a sin. He claims to be dangerous to all those he loves, despises humans (except the one woman he loved), thinks himself to be superior to all other humans, and wants nothing more than to die and escape this wretched life. The Byronic hero has been described as possessing such traits as, "a contempt of conventional morality, alienation, burning inward torment, and a heroic defiance of fate" (Damsroch and Dettmar 695). Since the creation of Polidori's Byronic vampire character, we have come to see that vampires in Literature and popular culture since then all tend to be rather Byronic in nature.

Lord Ruthven becomes a Byronic hero largely through the narration of a "sidekick" type of character, Aubrey, who is quite possibly the opposite of Byronic, being naïve, romantic, and ignorant. Lord Ruthven is first depicted by Aubrey as "a man entirely absorbed in himself, who gave few other signs of his observation of external objects," and we find that Aubrey "soon formed this object into the hero of a romance" (Polidori 70-71). We also know that Lord Ruthven is pale yet beautiful, is a rich nobleman, has a way of winning people over with his words, and, like Manfred, "apparently, had nothing in common with other men" (Polidori 69-71). He seems like a bad type of man, gambling and seducing women, therefore ruining their reputations and any chance at marriage. Lord Ruthven seems linked to the "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" character which a former lover of Byron's, Caroline Lamb, claims of Byron himself (Damsroch and Dettmar 695).

Ruthven remains mysterious throughout the tale, a very quiet, yet rich and charming man. We do not see any kind of hint of remorse for the crimes we discover he has committed—killing women by sinking his teeth into their jugulars. This is one aspect in which Ruthven strays from the Byronic hero; Byronic heroes usually suffer inward pain and remorse for their evil deeds, which they believe are out of their control. Yet, Ruthven does display most characteristics of the Byronic hero, especially the understanding of himself as super-human as compared to the rest of the human race, and his apparent inability to die. He states, "I heed the death of my existence as little as that of the passing day," echoing Manfred's own inner turmoil and desire to die (Polidori 79). What we can take from Polidori's Byronic vampire hero is an understanding of many Byronic heroes to follow—such as Edward Rochester, Heathcliff, and even possibly

Edward Cullen. Certainly, modern day models of the vampire character stem from Polidori's mixture of the undead and the Byronic hero.

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Annotation V
30 September 2010

John Clare's Badger

I have been thinking more and more about Simon Estok's ideas concerning ecophobia and ecophilia--and how they open up discussions about the Romantic ecological vision as well as offer a negotiation with Scott Hess' "everyday nature." Estok was lambasted in the following *ISLE* publication, but I think he makes an important point. Queer theory and feminist theory have done a great job theorizing and exposing the hatred, homophobia, bigotry, misogyny in language and in society--both the conspicuous expressions of these attitudes as well as the more latent and insidious. Estok contends that ecocritics tend towards ecophilia, and they have not done a good enough job exposing the hatred of nature, of animals, of plants that is in countless texts, commercials, tv shows, etc. Estok's point is that the ecocritical project is not going to get anywhere until some serious work on ecophobia is done, both on the scholarly level and in classrooms. How can we teach an Environmental Lit. course and only focus on ecophilic texts? We can't, is his point.

I have not read John Clare before, and I am loving what I am seeing. His cottage poem that we discussed in class is a great example of ecophilia, and the moment we contrast the attitude with ecophobia, the poem takes on a radical dimension. People may read and like the idea of that poem, but so many people could not enact it. To many people hate nature, or at least want to keep it contained and on their terms. As an arborist, I heard countless homeowners complain about the mess of trees, of raccoons, of squirrels, of birds. I have had home owners point a finger in my face and say "I hate that tree." Good grief. Don't tell an arborist that. I have heard people joke around about lynching squirrels and hanging them in doorsteps of a home owned by a PETA activist. People move into the foothills of the Rockies but then hate the rattlesnakes. Many want to keep a firm line between nature and culture, and once a creature crosses that line, it becomes a pest.

...so I was excited to find a poem by Clare that explores ecophobia. The humans in "The Badger" (1235-36) are *the badger* as they harass, brutalize, and eventually kill one of the badgers. This is abject cruelty, especially at the end of the poem when the kids throw another badger into a decay pocket of a tree--a pocket full of bees: "And runs away from noise in hollow trees / Burnt by the boys to get a swarm of bees" (ln 67-68). This poem is getting at that deeply entrenched attitude of entitlement. Why have some men felt entitled to subjugate women? Why have some people felt entitled to own a slave? Why do humans feel entitled to treat animals with abject cruelty and treat ecosystems, plants, animals as mere commodities that turn a buck? Why do the hunters and their children feel entitled to brutalize the badger?

The fact that Clare has this poem shows that his ecophilia is not naive; rather, it is a radical alternative to the ecophobia he critiques in "The Badger."

All this gets back to Scott Hess' "everyday nature," for we just don't need an exploration of everyday ecophilia, but perhaps what we need more is an exploration of everyday ecophobia.

The time he spent critiquing the Romantic sublime could have been better spent critiquing how poets, like John Clare, work to expose everyday ecophobia.

P.S. I imagine that animal studies scholars have already given a thorough exploration of John Clare's work. If not, it would make for a rich discussion. Even if they have, I wonder if they have touched on the bioregional aspect of Clare's vision and/or the everyday ecophilia and everyday ecophobia that is at work there. Possible article?

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Annotation V
September 27, 2010

"A bliss peculiar": Pain and Poetic Experience in the *Journal-Letter from John Keats to George and Georgiana Keats*

The April 21, 1819 entry of John Keats's *Journal-Letter to George and Georgiana Keats* constitutes a portrayal of the soul as a product of deep thoughts brought on by suffering. The tendencies that inspire poetry occur in the midst of trauma, and refine unique perceptions and rarefied sentiments from the uncomplicated matter of the innocent mind. Keats describes the sensibilities of the poet as the result of careful attention to the troubles of life. He complicates his description by arguing that the poet's thoughts enrich the complexity of a greater essential whole. By analyzing Keats's conception of identity, I intend to arrive at a clearer understanding of the place and purpose of the soul of the poet, both in its own specific distinction and in regard to the more ambiguous notion of the divine body present in the *Journal-Letter*.

Keats draws his concept of the soul and macrocosm from the language and orders of religion, playing ideas of wisdom and salvation in the world against conventions that devalue the full range of experiences. The world is not a "'vale of tears,' from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God," but a sort of spiritual and emotional crucible, the "'Vale of Soul-Making'" (Keats 1389). Human nature and essence both benefit from struggles in the world, as "sparks of the divinity [...] acquire identities" through "pains and troubles" (1389). Living things contribute to the sensory input of a greater divine body, whose purity is unfavorable, as the very existence of the individual soul hinges on a process of creation—"making"—rooted in unpleasant states, and thoughts about those states. Keats's understanding of identity as following stresses that occur in life is compelling, and his argument for the reconciliation of divine possibility and cognitive actuality—spirit and mind, "divine spark" and locus of impressions—is especially remarkable. Selfhood is not innate: the "proper action of mind and heart on each other for the purpose of forming the soul or intelligence destined to possess the sense of identity" entails a conversation between the feeling parts of the person and "the world or elemental space" (Ibid). Salvation—identity and *consciousness* of identity, which Keats regards as "soul"—cannot occur in suspension, but rather, results from an exchange between states and impressions.

Because the existence of the soul and salvation are effectively synonymous for Keats, and dependent on worldly events, actions, and thoughts, the April 21st *Journal-Letter* casts innocence as an undefined, meaningless state. This state neither benefits the accumulation of experiences that constitute the divine, nor achieves any richness for itself, and so the "spark of intelligence" in "children" "returns to God without any identity" (1390). I have reason to suspect that Keats does not speak to impurity and damnation in a religious sense, but instead, elaborates further upon a model of maturity—"provings" of the "human heart"—that inspires the unique interpretations characteristic of poetic thinking (Ibid). The poet benefits from disorientation and anxiety, from a sense of dislocation with the world. The thoughts that power the creation of the identity support creative thought, and the emergence of the singular imaginative voice.

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9/30/10

Annotation of William Wordsworth's *Stepping Westward*

William Wordsworth's *Stepping Westward* contemplates his travels in Scotland and the concept and connotations of travel—particularly westward travel. Wordsworth's epigraph at the introduction of the poem scaffolds the poem's content and structure, allowing him to credit the inspiration of the poem to a "well-dressed" woman that greeted him by Loch Ketterine (547)¹. These two conditions of context are significant to note, for Wordsworth discusses consequential themes of excursions and explorations within a fairly innocuous and, although I am hesitant to use this word for other reasons, domestic setting. The regional elements of place and space and the domestic presence are converging themes in this poem, and interesting thought when considering the essential feminine element in Wordsworth's own "stepping westward".

In terms of Wordsworth's regional placement, it seems to reify a trend that I have begun to witness in British conceptions of "frontier" in that the British, as contrasted to the American conception of 'frontier' articulated and epitomized by Frederick Jackson Turner, conceptualize frontier as between a borderland between two civilizations—a place where sovereignty, colonial presence, and lawful regulation is diminished. Wordsworth, in Scotland, announces that the greeting of "What are you stepping westward" is a "sound/Of something without place or bound" (line 14). However, geopolitical surroundings belie this sensation of absolute freedom from place into undefined space—Wordsworth was surrounded by ecological and political borderlands. Moreover, even though he was in "one of the loneliest parts of that solitary region", he is not "without place" (547, line 14). Indeed, the evidence of the hut, and the two well-dressed women, signify civilization—and domesticity. Taking into consideration past theories and conceptions of civilization and wilderness as binaries, it is the presence of the domestic within space that reduces the "wildness" of the "wilderness". This is a driving thought of Kaplan's *Manifest Domesticity*, in which Kaplan relates the concept that American feelings of manifest destiny were girded by the subsequent domesticization of the environment—and the continual desire to move away from 'place' into space and leave the domestic sphere. Wordsworth deepens this connection between the female presence and traveling, however, noting that the voice of the woman who first spoke to him "enwrought/ A human sweetness with the thought/Of traveling through the world that lay/Before me in my endless way" (lines 23-26). In this sense, Wordsworth seems to search for a place "without place or bound" but which is also combined with "human sweetness"—as if he is not seeking a solitary presence at all. I have not fully decided on the significance of this interweaving in Wordsworth's poem, but it is significantly disparate from many other writers who wish to step westward (or travel to solitary regions) simply to be away from the domestic and public spheres. Edward Abbey (here I understand that I'm mixing cultures, genres, time-periods, etc., but I love looking at patterns) jettisoned the domestic presence in his life to publish *Desert Solitaire*, for there was no "human sweetness" in the thought of traveling through unbounded place.

Moreover, it seems interesting to me that Wordsworth correlates a "wildish destiny" with stopping with his fellow traveler for "fear to advance" without moving farther westward (lines 2, 6). In terms of word choice alone, it seems that he is saying that the wild (and therefore insensible) choice would be to be restrained (and sensible). This is an interesting twist of connotation, especially when juxtaposed with Wordsworth's later mention that moving westward appeared as "A

¹ Wordsworth, William. "Stepping Westward" Ed. Wu, Duncan. *Romanticism: An Anthology*. 3rd ed. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006. 547. Print.

kind of *heavenly* destiny”—a religious experience and a different form of destiny. Indeed, Wordsworth notes that the destiny gave him a “spiritual right/To travel through that region bright”, a line reminiscent of Manifest Destiny and the connotations of “light” associated with colonization and civilization (lines 15-16). I will have to consider Wordsworth’s other works to get a more lucid understanding of how he thinks about colonization, destiny, the right to travel/explore, and the presence of the civilized and domestic, but this poem is significant in that it problematizes many commonplaces usually present in discussions of the westward movement of civilizations.

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9/30/10
Annotation #5

Imitation and Representation in Romanticism

Since the idea of these annotations is to allow our minds to be guided by curiosity and wonder, I want to do something different. My attempt in this short paper will be to generate some necessary questions about the representation of nature in Romantic literature without focusing on a specific work. Since this week we read much about ecocriticism and nature, I feel it is important to pose the questions I will pose later.

After reading about ecocriticism and what it is and isn't, my mind generated a litany of questions about nature and literature. Poetry is, in form and idea, a representation of nature. It is a form of art that allows a reader to experience nature in a different, and oftentimes, new way. But the word "representation" is a stumbling-block to me; something I seriously had to consider before proceeding into thinking about nature and ecocriticism. A representation is, literally, something that represents something else. In this discussion, that something else, or other, is nature. Shelley wrote "Mont Blanc" because he was inspired by the real Mont Blanc, and thus his poem is a representation of the real thing. But what is the danger of representing nature? Do we, as humans, have the right to attempt an imitation of nature? These questions have haunted me for several days.

On one hand, a representation of nature—I'll use a poem—allows me to experience nature in a perfect moment. A poem is always a poem, and, once printed, never changes. But nature can lose its perfect status. A sunset is fleeting, a sunny day is ruined by a cloud, a deer will die. Representations allow me to experience the sublime from a safe distance because I am never actually close to the danger; I can rely on memories of potentially dangerous circumstances to bring back those sublime feelings. Nature, on this hand, is perfected and frozen. It is only as close as our fingertips.

On the other hand, this mediated experiencing of nature never allows me to actually be in nature because I am experiencing it all from an imitation. Doesn't most of the enjoyment from nature come from actually being there? Why am I relying on poems, paintings, and photographs to tell me what nature is? Shouldn't I experience it for myself? These questions have revisited me as I read "Expostulation and Reply." At first, books are the soundest way to gain knowledge, then nature herself carries all the wisdom.

A view of both of the above points produces even more questions. Does simply enjoying representations of nature protect nature in a way? If more people were to rely on what poems tell them, and experience joy and sublimity from the poems, would fewer people actually go out into nature? In his book *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey describes one of the most beautiful places on Earth, but simultaneously warns people to stay away, as if to say "enjoy my representation of nature so that you don't come here and destroy it." Some may say that simply experiencing nature through representations makes us forget about "true nature" completely, thus neglecting her. In this case, we are really only enjoying art, not nature.

Questions such as these cannot be answered in a one-page paper, but I feel strongly they need to be addressed. I hope we can discuss them further in this course.

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Textual Comparison: Two Versions of Clare's "The Badger"

Clare's "The Badger" might be his most famous poem, the one most likely to be anthologized. Interesting, then, that his most famous poem has existed in two forms drastically different from one another. Our anthology presents a five-stanza poem since this is the way it is in Clare's manuscripts. But another common version of the poem leaves off the first and last stanzas, presenting the remaining three stanzas as a complete poem. These are two different poems, indeed.

The three-stanza version begins like a typical narrative, establishing time and place and introducing the action: "When midnight comes a host of dogs and men / Go out and track the badger to his den" (7-8). The rest of this version follows as a fairly linear narrative, telling the story of the badger from the time he is taken from his den and brought back to the village to be tormented, to the time he is killed as he tries to escape back to his home. It ends when the main character, the badger, "groans and dies" (54).

The five-stanza version subsumes these three stanzas verbatim, but adds one stanza each at the beginning and end. In this version, the first stanza is a kind of general portrait of the animal, describing his habits and characteristics. The depiction is so generalized that it can be said to be a portrait of the species, not one specific animal, even though the stanza begins with the definite "The badger" (1). This stanza is almost comical in its depiction, describing a shambling, shaggy creature that roots around in the brush and trips up unwary fox hunters his den openings.

The last stanza in the five-stanza version comes after the narrative portion has already announced the death of the badger. Echoing the first stanza, we return to the subject of badgers generally, leaving the specific badger of the narrative. We get an account of the practice of turning baited badgers into semi-tame animals that are kept for amusement like a pet. Again, this is no longer the account of a specific animal, but the account of how "Some keep a baited badger tame as hog" (55).

Looking first at the shorter, three-stanza version, one can easily understand the inclination to omit the first and last stanzas. The three-stanza narrative is cohesive, localized, and traces a natural story-arc. It begins with the introduction of the conflict (the men beginning the chase), continues with some complications of that conflict (the torments inflicted by the village residents), and ends with the climax and denouement (the escape attempt and death). This is satisfying in that it meets our expectations for narrative.

In this light, adding the first and last stanzas to this three-stanza narrative complicates things. It is fairly obvious why these two stanzas were omitted, but why were they included in Clare's manuscript version? Perhaps the first stanza is there to evoke sympathy in the reader. Considering the brutality of the action, Clare certainly takes a rather neutral tone in the poem, reporting the events as a third-person objective narrator. Therefore, Clare may have felt the need to be sure that the reader made an emotional connection to the protagonist. He does this through the introductory stanza, evoking a somewhat comical and pathetic animal. Badger is not worth hunting, but gets in the way of hunts; he is not sleek and graceful but slow and ponderous; he can be outrun by just about anything.

The last stanza, coming as it does after the climax and death of the main character, is

less clear. What can Clare accomplish by following that dramatic death with a general account of the further torments that villagers visit upon badgers? Perhaps Clare is reinforcing the fact that the narrative was not an isolated incident, but typical of the treatment this species receives. But there is a big shift in the nature of the treatment; the “hero” of the narrative was a wild animal, whereas the last stanza describes a tamed animal. The juxtaposition puts in vivid relief that ferocious, heroic character exhibited by the wild one in valiantly defending himself. The tame one earns our pity, but not our admiration.