

ENG 521
Daniela Miranda
October 7, 2010

The Sublime in William Blake's Engravings

"...and a face purple with suns."
Gustave Simon

Meg Armstrong's approach to the sublime was very inspiring to me this week, especially how she interprets Burke's theories on colors and light and shadow in regards to gender and race. In keeping with my interest in visual representations during the Romantic period, however, I am more interested in how the sublime was also represented in the artistic works of the time. As a Romantic writer and thinker, William Blake, like many of his contemporaries, addressed the topic of the sublime in his poetry. However, Blake was also an accomplished engraver, painter, and illustrator whose art also explores the topic of the sublime, especially through his use of colors, light and shadow, and choice in topics.

In terms of colors, Burke states that in order for a work of art to be sublime, it must feature "sad and fuscous colors" instead of "cheerful" ones. In Blake's depiction of Old Testament Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, for instance, he stays within Burke's proposed color scheme: the figure of the King is set off against an extremely dark background and, in most versions, the figure itself is cast in shadows. Even in more "cheerful" versions of this monotype, Blake still keeps the colors muted, sticking to fleshy tones for the figure and keeping the tree trunk in the background shrouded in darkness.

Blake's choice of topic, too, in this particular engraving transmits a feeling of the sublime. Blake's depiction of the King is based on the tale in the Book of David, which recounts Nebuchadnezzar's mental degeneration into a beast-man. Blake makes this deterioration obvious through his depiction of the King's feet as "bird's talons" (The Minneapolis Institute of Arts), and through the figure's nakedness and crawling stance. I also think that the figure's mental decay is further reinforced by Blake's focus on the King's musculature. This seems to uphold the physical over the rational, as if to indicate that through the weakening of his mental faculties, Nebuchadnezzar has strengthened his body, one of his most animalistic features. As with most depictions of the sublime, Blake's monotype is particularly disturbing and horrifying. The figure's face, specifically, clearly conveys Nebuchadnezzar's madness and a great sadness at the same time, which I believe reinforces the horror inherent to the picture by suggesting that, in spite of his madness, the King is also aware of his pitiful descent into bestiality. In other words, he is conscious of his transformation and this makes his condition even more tragic. However,



Blake. *Nebuchadnezzar*. Color Monotype in tempera with additions in ink and watercolor. Collection MFA Boston

the viewer's aesthetic distance allows the image to remain as just that: a tragic depiction of a fallen King. This allows the monotype to become truly sublime since, as spectators, we are safely removed from the actual horror of becoming beasts ourselves.

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David Tagnani
Dr. Debbie Lee
English 521
7 October 2010

Identity, Anthropomorphism, and Speciesism in Clare's "To an Insignificant Flower"

Several remarkable and antithetical moments of identity take place in this poem. Clare seems at once determined to appreciate the "weedling" on its own terms yet so far gone into self-pity that he cannot help anthropomorphizing the flower. He seems on one hand to avoid speciesism by discovering the merits of a disdained plant, yet on the other hand to perpetuate speciesism by conveying the thought that the plant is valuable because it is like him. Unlike some other Clare poems we've looked at, "To an Insignificant Flower" gets its power not from a radically progressive ecological ethos, but from a revelation of the stark emotional contradictions and illogicality of the human heart.

Throughout the poem, Clare uses repetition to establish the power and depth of this identity with this flowering weed. The plant is "wild and neglected like to me," the speaker establishing a negative identity that they share, one of alienation and otherness (2). This line reappears verbatim at line 12, emphasizing both the connection and the qualities. Other uses of repetition include describing the plant's appearance in terms of shabby human clothing, both as "humble garb" (6) and "lowly raiment" (14). This repetition also is used to reinforce his identity with the flower, as he goes on to describe himself as both "humble" (27) and "lowly" (35).

Is this genuinely ecocentric, identifying with nature and feeling a sense of connection and unity? Or is this anthropocentric, addressing and describing the plant in human terms and finding value only insofar as he can see himself reflected in it?

These questions remain as Clare continues presenting thoughts and images that are strangely contradictory. The following stanza exhibits this:

And, like to thee, each seeming weed
Flowers unregarded; like to thee,
Without improvement, runs to seed,
Wild and neglected like to me. (9-12)

The fact that the weed flowers "unregarded" is of course anthropocentric, since if the flower will "run to seed," it certainly must be regarded by whatever pollinates it. He is identifying himself with the flower and so finding value in the attention of humans. He understandably desires the attention of humans, but a flower does not. Going to seed is in fact an indication that this organism has had a successful reproductive cycle and will come again next season.

Another instance of anthropocentrism in the above stanza is the phrase "without improvement." The exact meaning cannot be fixed, but it most certainly alludes to some kind of human intervention to prevent the loss of the bloom. This manipulation of the flower's reproductive cycle in order to prolong a human aesthetic experience is entirely contradictory to Clare's reputation. It is placing human desires over the needs of the non-human, interfering with the flower's very means of existence in order to satisfy a fleeting and inessential want.

Of course, I'm indulging a narrow and rather mean-spirited ecocritical reading. The point here is not the promotion of the virtues of this weed, but an expression of the desolation of Clare's rural working class. Indeed, to read this poem without regard to the

desperate cry of the human speaker would be almost inhuman. Clare's speaker feels like a weed in a ditch, neglected, wild, low, humble, and mean. He is in want of the most basic human needs: the attention and company of fellow humans. Though we see a disregard for the flower on its own terms, we also see a desperately lonely man crying out to us . . . might not ignoring that to focus on a weed in a ditch be a form of speciesism itself? The weed, after all, has bloomed and seems to be getting along just fine without our attention. The same cannot be said for the man.

Devon Bailey
D. Lee
English 521
7 October 2010

George Crabbe's "Peter Grimes"

Originally a surgeon, George Crabbe turned to writing in "1780 and went to London, where he secured the patronage of Edmund Burke" (Wu 142). His interest appears to be social conduct in London with an emphasis on "the realist tradition of Shakespeare and Chaucer" (Wu 142). Crabbe's poem "Peter Grimes" is horrifying, yet good example of the cross-section between disease, crime, and poverty. The poem's subtitle explains that it comes from a series of Borough Letters, which this is number twenty-two: *The Poor of the Borough*.

The immediate representation of the poor, old fisherman incites pity in the reader especially since the old fisherman is pious and seems like he could stand for the average man. Also, the uneven and long stanzas make the poem more like a narrative with meter which is most easily noticed when read aloud. As early as the first stanza, it is clear that "young" Peter, the old fisherman's son, is troubled when Crabbe writes "But soon the stubborn boy broke loose" (l. 8). It seems that young Peter, from the beginning of the poem, is troubled by a mental illness or at least alcohol inspired rage. Peter expresses outrage at his father's attempts to read him the bible, and as a result kills his father and "drank for his relief" (l. 33).

The murder of his father is the first step down the degraded life of Peter Grimes. Once his father is dead, he takes over his fishing profession and takes on orphans as servant/slaves. The footnote explains that "In order to reduce the poor-rate in London, it was customary towards the end of the 18th Century to farm out children of paupers to 'masters' in other parishes, who would be given about £5 in return for maintaining them and teaching them a trade" (Wu 144). This common practice is probably the impetus for the poem, since it is the availability of these boys for cheap which seems to define the little value that was placed on the lives of the poor. The poem describes the boys as orphans, but they were not necessarily orphans, but orphans by necessity since their parents could not care for them.

The practice of apprenticeship at face value seems to be a win-win situation for the learning boy and the aided "owner", but in the hands of a man like Peter Grimes, who killed his own father; these boys were subjects for his abuse and torture. The workhouse allows Peter Grimes to purchase and then subsequently kill three boys before the women in the community decide three can no longer be an accident, as he had claimed. Peter Grimes purchases the boys and immediately starves and beats them until they ultimately have a fatal 'accident'.

The duration of the poem describes Peter Grimes as diseased and deteriorating, mentally and physically. Eventually the townspeople notice that he no longer fishes, but only goes out in his boat to stare out at the water. It appears that Peter Grimes shows remorse because he mental deterioration is due to the fact that he began to be "waked by his views if horrors in the night" (l. 226). This haunting whether it was in his mind through illness or through real remorse ultimately causes Peter to be tormented by the ghosts of his murder victims.

While the Wu introduction explains Crabbe's tilt towards realism, the Romanticism of nature comes through in the role of the river. The poem explains the parts of the river which are "Places accursed where, if a man remain, / He'll see the things which strike him to the brain" (ll. 340-1). These visions are what fuel Peter's mental degradation which lasts until the last two lines

of the poem “Then with an inward, broken voice he cried, / ‘Again they come!’ and muttered as he died” (ll. 374-5). The horrifying life of Peter Grimes begins and ends within the lines of George Crabbe’s poem.

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Erica Olson
10-8-10

Shelley, "The Sensitive Plant"

This week I came across a brilliant poem by Shelley that I had never heard of before: "The Sensitive Plant." In the poem a lady with hair so long it trails on the grass tends a flowery garden. She is "an Eve in this Eden," but she is not a fallen Eve: she is described as a god to this "sublunar Heaven" and while she lives is master of the garden. Before the time comes to fall (i.e. autumn), she dies. I don't have space here to describe or quote from the poem in detail, but I encourage anyone who hasn't read it to read it *immediately* – it is a stunning, gorgeous, marvelous poem. There are beautiful descriptions for the different types of flowers, all assembled like characters on a stage, "each one...interpenetrated / With the light and the odour its neighbour shed" (1:66-7). The vivid language carries over into autumn and another march of plant characters, this time of the "thistles and nettles, and darnels rank, / And the dock, and henbane; and hemlock dank..." (3:54-6).

If, as in *Candide*, the ultimate happiness we can achieve in life comes from tending our own 'garden,' Shelley's poem depicts what becomes of life's garden when the caretaker dies. After the lady's death, autumn comes with all the rot, the scum, "the vapours...which have strength to kill" (3:75). The lady has a little power left, for the "fungi with mildew and mould" feed off the soil where she is buried, "as if the decaying dead with a spirit of growth had been animated." But what is a dead body? It is atoms, according to Shelley in another poem, "Ode to Heaven." The 'spirit' left in the lady is just what was before, the physical matter and atoms; these have a 'spirit' to make life because these are the things that are always forming life.

If a body, living or dead, is atoms that are one with a wider universe, what is the Sensitive Plant? In the description of spring and summer, "the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower; Radiance and odour are not its dower" (1:75-6). But though it has no beauty to give, it can feel love more than any other plant: "the Sensitive Plant, which could give small fruit / Of the love which it felt from the leaf to the root, / Received more than all, it loved more than ever" (1:70-3). If "Sensitive" means sensory, capable of feeling, it is possible that the Sensitive Plant represents a larger part of the universe that remains to remember the human even when the human is gone. Perhaps one message is that people are in a way immortal because there is some kind of "mind" in the atoms of the universe themselves.

However, the poet cannot say "whether that lady's gentle mind, / No longer with the form combined / ...Found sadness, where it left delight" (Conclusion:5-8). There is no express belief in an afterlife in this poem. Here the consolation for mortal minds does not lie in the fact that the lady's life was so beautiful and good, although it was but short; it is too horrifying to see things that are "prickly, and pulpous, and blistering, and blue" take the place of the lady's life's work. Nor does consolation lie in the fact that the "Sensitive Plant" remains to remember beauty and love, because it seems that the plant also dies: "When winter had gone and spring came back / The Sensitive Plant was a leafless wreck" (3:114-5). The poet says, "Whether the Sensitive Plant, or that / Which within its boughs like a spirit sat / Ere its outward form had known decay, / Now felt this change [the coming of spring], I cannot say." (Conclusion:1-4). Shelley's end message seems to be that "we [are] the shadows of the dream" (Conclusion:12). "Death itself must be, / Like all the rest, a mockery" (Conclusion:15) – and he thinks this idea is "pleasant if one considers it" (Conclusion:14). The lady and her garden "in truth have never passed away" (Conclusion:17-20), and Shelley says that "For love, and beauty, and delight, / There is no death nor change: their might / Exceeds our organs" (Conclusion:21-3). I think he wants us to see

beauty in everything that is organic, not just in flowers – which could explain why he uses such marvelous language to describe even the traditionally ugly plants of fall. All is natural, the human body is part of seasons and natural cycles even as it decays, and Shelley thinks we should see the beauty and wonder in that and stop worrying about death.

Jacob Hughes
Age of Wonder
Annotation 6
October 5, 2010

Imaginary Othering

But isn't all "othering" imaginary, at least in the sense that there are *other* things, *other* people, *other* places, *other* times, which can ultimately only be confirmed through human reasoning and organization? So, in practice, the sublime must be imaginary. Between reading Armstrong's "The Effects of Blackness": Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant," Wordsworth's *Crossing the Alps* from *The Thirteen-Prelude Book VI*, and pondering last week's in-class discussions on ecocriticism, I'm struck by how essential "othering" is in the process of experiencing sublimity. I don't suppose such reactions need to be insidious, but there's a connection here with border-stepping, which I've been on about for quite some time. Those borders to which I've been blabbing on about *are* products of "othering," areas of classification that can only really be identified either *as* border-areas or unclassifiable. To use a contemporary example, think about "zombies." They're classified based on what they're not, and what they're not is "dead," so that means they should be called "un-dead." And, I'm probably not alone in supposing that meeting a zombie would be a sublime experience for most.

Wordsworth, in his opening lines from *Crossing the Alps*, seems to indicate that his initial conception of Mont Blanc was disappointed by actually beholding the summit: "That day we first/Beheld the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved/To have a soulless image on the eye/Which had usurped upon a living thought/That never more could be" (450-456). If we can assume that Wordsworth's imaginary encounter with Mont Blanc was indeed sublime, then must we also assume that his disappointed experience resulted from his initially exaggerated (or, to be less derogatory, again "imaginary") conception was the result of an othered perspective? Sublimity must in some respect explode the mind and its conceptions of what can and cannot be, at least in terms of a mortal human experience. Mortality, in this case, is essential, for confronting true mortality (and all it entails) spans further than the human mind can simultaneously comprehend. In other words, Wordsworth rationalizes Mont Blanc by seeing it, despite the florid language he uses to describe his experience there in the poem's subsequent lines. He can no longer rely on his mind's eye, which is entirely subjective.

This change of perspective, however, has not prevented Wordsworth from poetically objectifying his subject: "With such a book/Before our eyes we could not choose but read/A frequent lesson of sound tenderness,/the universal reason of mankind,/The truth of young and old" (473-477). Such an objectification, however, doesn't necessarily suggest othering via a sublime reaction. Perhaps I wouldn't go so far as to suggest that Wordsworth understands his surroundings, but maybe he has formed an intimate, subjective understanding that defies sublime reactivity. Maybe, at least for him in this situation, there's no such thing as "the Sublime" outside of an imaginary context.

However, I also would not go so far as to say that an imaginary context is mutually exclusive with a physical experience, either. For example, I *imagined* countless ways to die the first time I flew on a plane (and several subsequent occasions, actually). But I couldn't reconcile my borderland, not in any rational sense. Wordsworth, on the other hand, seems to have come to

terms (disappointingly for him) with an experience that *should* have been sublime. It all looked good on paper, I suppose.

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Jenna Leeds

Dr. Lee

Engl 521

4 October 2010

Anna Letitia Barbauld's "On a Lady's Writing"

Essentially forgotten within the 20th century and only referenced for her work as a children's author within the 19th century, Anna Letitia Barbauld exemplifies what it means to be a female writer during the Romantic period. Despite the fact that Barbauld was published in multiple genres, as she was a poet, an essayist, and a children's author, her status as a writer was continuously undermined by her gender. After her death, Barbauld was lauded in the *Newcastle Magazine* as "unquestionably the best of our female poets," essentially neutralizing her accomplishments by way of gendering them. However, Barbauld was conscious of patriarchal society's need to undermine her accomplishments and recognized it within her work. She carefully balanced her desire to be politically active with patriarchal society's need for her to follow their constructed ideology regarding femininity. Written in 1773, "On a Lady's Writing," serves to comment upon female authorship. Noting Barbauld's penchant for satire as well as her ability to operate within heteronormative society and her later regard within circles of feminist literary theory, I argue that we must read "On a Lady's Writing" as social commentary regarding the neutralization of successful female writers by way of gendered ideologies.

Barbauld begins her poem with a list of ambiguous descriptions that could be applied both to a female author's writing and gendered appearance. She states, "her even lines her steady temper show" (1). The phrase "even lines" could describe the contours of the female figure or lines of writing while her steady temper could easily be referencing a passivity linked with the feminine body or the patience needed to write lines of poetry or prose evenly. Barbauld's title reflects this ambiguity, as "On a Lady's writing" could either be about the act of writing, describing the writer, or the writing itself. Although "On a Lady's Writing" reveals these descriptions are specifically about writing within the next few lines, the opening of Barbauld's poem divulges a social commentary deeply concerned with gendered appearance. Barbauld comments upon patriarchal society's inability to see poems written by women as anything other than extensions of femininity. In essence, the work of female writers and poets could only succeed and exist within a microcosm of female authorship. Barbauld expresses these sentiments regarding the unfair ideologies issued by patriarchal society about female authorship as she writes, "correct though free, and regular though fair:/And the same graces o'er her pen preside" (4-5). By emphasizing the credibility and talent of female writers despite their unfair working conditions, Barbauld implies that female writers are undermined by patriarchal systems despite the quality of their writing and are therefore neutralized. In doing so, Barbauld promotes progressive thoughts of equality amongst writing.

Joelle Moen
Engl 521, Lee
6 Oct 2010
Annotation #6

Felicia Hemans and the Universal Mother

In her collection of poetry *Records of Woman* (1828), Felicia Hemans¹ poetically profiles a number of fictional and historical women. In fact, most of the poems are titled by the name of the main character, for example, “Arabella Stuart,” “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” and “Costanza.” Although three of the nineteen pieces in this collection are memorial poems, describing a monument to a deceased woman,² even these works praise and describe the life of those they memorialize. An even more interesting exception within this collection is that all but four of these poems are about European women. The exceptions include “Edith, a Tale of the Woods”; “The Indian City”; “Indian Woman’s Death Song”; and “An American Forest Girl.” By setting these poems on continents outside Europe while having them address the same themes as those set inside Europe, Hemans argues for the universality of female strength under difficult circumstances.

The two poems that best exemplify Hemans’ theme of female courage and its universality are “The Indian City” and “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and they show this idea through the poem’s main character, a powerful and determined mother.³ In “The Indian City,” a Muslim mother traveling through the Hindu section of India mourns her murdered son who dies in her arms. Of this event, the narrator asks, “Are there not words for that common woe? / Ask of the thousands, its depths that know!” (97-98). Although thousands of mothers have had to mourn dead children, this mother is different. Although she shrieks (120), she promises to “shed no tear” (115) or rest “‘till yon city, in ruins rent, / Be piled for its victim’s monument” (133-35). Yet once she enacts her revenge, “Sickening, she turned from her sad renoun,” (185) realizing the slaughter of a city won’t restore her “broken heart, and [her son’s] bright blood shed” (214). Her continued sadness shows her “deep heart,” (229) which is wounded and hasn’t “closed without a scar” (epigraph). This emotional depth demonstrates this woman’s goodness and dedication as a mother.

The mother depicted in “Indian Woman’s Death Song” likewise shows her dignity in the face of difficulty. Abandoned by her husband, this woman takes her child over a thundering cataract (6) in “a light canoe” (2) to find “the glorious bowers where none are heard to weep, / And where th’ unkind one hath no power again to trouble sleep” (40-41). Although this mother takes the life of her child instead of revenging the loss of a child, she’s like the Muslim mother of the previous poem in that she takes decisive, triumphant (11) action to “lave the memory of [her] woe” (33). In fact, she commits suicide with her child to save her daughter—who is “Too bright a thing. . . to pine in aching love” (38)—“from sorrow and decay” (39). The mother’s personal well-being takes second place to that of her child.

¹ Felicia Hemans supported her children, mother, and sister by selling her poetry after being deserted by her husband while pregnant with their fifth child. Needing the money her publications could bring her, Hemans wrote quickly, producing nearly a book of poetry each year for more than ten years. Of these collections, *Records of Woman* (1828) was clearly her favorite. In a letter to a friend, Hemans wrote that she put more of her “heart and individual feelings into it more than anything else” she had written (qtd. in Wu 1246). Most of these poems depict women overcoming difficult circumstances and frequently difficult men. Perhaps that’s why it was the one to which she felt most closely connected.

² Wu reproduces the entire poetic sequence of *Records of Woman*, along with some “Miscellaneous Pieces” which Hemans included in the first edition. These five extra poems generally break from the pattern of the main work, although “The Sicilian Captive” is about a fictional woman taken from her home.

³ The tales told in “Edith, a Tale of the Woods” and “An American Forest Girl” show how women maintain dignity even away from the trappings of society, a theme emphasized by the place names “Woods” and “Forest” in the titles. But that discussion is for another paper.

Although Hemans' Indian mothers are different in their circumstances and actions, they are linked by their personal fortitude and decisive actions. Indeed, they are also linked by the descriptive they share: they've both "Indian." However, the woman in "The Indian City" is from the country of India in the subcontinent of Asia, whereas the woman from the "Indian Woman's Death Song" resides in the Americas. This word choice unites two mothers of the poems, even as it disorients the reader. Thematically, these women are linked to the others in the collection through their tenacity and courage. By showing these women from British colonies to be like their European counterparts, in many ways, Hemans makes a feminist statement wrapped in colonial trappings.

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Karin Gresham

Professor Debbie Lee

English 521

7 October 2007

Cooper's Racially Sublime Heroine Must Die

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke associates masculinity with the sublime and femininity with beauty, creating a framework within which he fails to adequately categorize black women. As Meg Armstrong notes, Burke considers black women as representatives of the sublime and entirely outside of his conception of femininity because they fail to meet his criterion of submissiveness as a component of feminine beauty (Armstrong 215). Other Romantic-era novelists express similar confused feelings towards dark-skinned women, for instance James Fennimore Cooper, whose 1826 publication, *The Last of the Mohicans*, depicts similarly muddled attitudes towards its mixed-race, quasi-heroine, Cora. In this tale, Cora's adulterated blood sets her apart from her racially pure sister Alice and ultimately necessitates her death. Unlike blonde, feminine Alice, dark, masculine Cora does not in Cooper's eyes embody the ideal vision of the new American woman, who must submit to the established patriarchal order. This idea becomes increasingly clear when we comprehend the narrative events of the novel alongside Burke's theories.

Cooper initially describes Cora as desirable, but Burke warns that desire and feminine beauty are not one and the same. Desire, as we may glean from Cooper's description, can also be a by-product of sublime experience. Cooper makes plain that Cora lacks certain qualities essential to civilized women; she is neither fair in complexion nor submissive in demeanor. He writes, "The tresses of this lady were shining and black, like the plumage of the raven. Her complexion was not brown, but it rather appeared charged with the color of the rich blood, that seemed ready to burst its bounds" (Cooper 24). Cora's description conveys visions of both fright and desire. She is not the contained, demure woman of Burke's envisioning but instead appears untamable.

Supporting Burke's beliefs in the horrific, sublime consequences of dark-skinned, feminine agency, Cooper further portrays the mixed-race Cora as a woman whose strong, masculine agenda jeopardizes the lives of her comrades. When captured by the Huron, she refuses to submit to their will by marrying Magua, instead preferring to sacrifice both her life and the lives of fellow captives. She explains to Alice and Duncan, "the Huron offers us both life- nay, more than both; he offers to restore Duncan- our invaluable Duncan . . . if I will bow down to this rebellious, stubborn pride of mine, and consent . . ." (125). But, she wonders, "Is life to be purchased at such a sacrifice?" (125). She decides not. While Cooper does not go so far as to suggest that her decision was poor, he illustrates the folly of her willfulness, which has led to the corruption of a previously established natural order. Cora further subverts patriarchal order when she demands equality amongst her male counterparts. After being rescued from enemy hands, she

asserts that she is able enough to make the arduous journey through enemy lines to reach her father's camp: "'We are equal!' said Cora, firmly; 'on such an errand we will follow to any danger!' The scout turned to her with a smile of honest and cordial approbation, as he answered- 'I would I had a thousand men, of brawny limbs and quick eyes, that feared death as little as you!'" (161). She has moved beyond the simply mimicry of masculine tones and now asserts her place among men as their equal.

At the end of the novel, however, Cooper highlights the deadly consequences of Cora's masculine metamorphosis. In the final pursuit of Cora, the characters battle for the second time at the mouth of their once hidden cave. Uncas, who was earlier compared to fiercer animals, is now likened to a deer, an animal of prey, as he eagerly leaps towards Cora's imprisoned position (378). The description is befitting, for he soon becomes Magua's prey after he fails to rescue Cora from death (379-80). In this scene, Cora and Uncas illustrate that their mutual attraction, as evident through Uncas's present vulnerability, is complicit in their demise. Cooper suggests that while Cora's adulterated embodiment was allowed to thrive for a time, it cannot last if society is to prevail. He likewise suggests that Uncas, a noble savage, becomes sublime desire's sacrifice in a horrific testament to Burke's theories. Through the death of the mixed-race, virginal heroine and the native hero, Cooper shows that a new American identity must embrace a homogenous rather than pluralistic racial identity. To be sure, he deliberately allows Alice, Cora's racially pure and beautiful half-sister, to survive alongside Britain's eponymous hero, Duncan. In these two figures, Cooper projects Burke's idealized forms of masculine sublimity and feminine beauty as ideal components of colonized and English society alike. By contrast, Cora, like Burke's black women, appears both beyond categorization and without a proper home in civilized culture.

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Kyle Thomas
ENG 521
Annotation 6
7 Oct. 2010

“The Convict” by William Wordsworth

After studying about disease among the sickened soldiers returning home from abroad, I found that the poem which we will be reading, “The Discharged Soldier,” has a strong resonance in Wordsworth’s “The Convict.” The images of the convict that Wordsworth describes are poignantly reminiscent of the “ghastly” images of the soldier in the first poem. By looking at these two poems together (however emphasizing the latter because it’s not a class reading), I aim to examine how the representations of a soldier and a convict are similarly conveyed through the narrators’ perceptions of the men and the affect of ‘place’ and environment.

Both poems begin with the narrator enjoying the solitude of the setting and reveling in nature. Although the introduction in “The Discharged Soldier” has a stronger thematic contrast between the narrator’s physical health and the ill soldier, the beginning of “The Convict” similarly evokes feelings that are quickly flipped. The narrator’s perception changes to a feeling of sorrow as “[he] turned to repair/ To the cell where the convict is laid,” and this introspective “sadness” continues to steer and shape the narrator’s consciousness (7,8). The image of the “thick-ribbed walls” is a descriptive association that the narrator forms to the physical weakness of the prisoner’s body (9). Other images are used to portray the prisoner with the characteristics of the sick and diseased: he’s referred to as an “outcast,” “his eyes are intent/ On the fetters that link him to death,” and again viewed as having a “body dismissed from his care” (12,15,16,18). Where “The Discharged Soldier” gives the literal description of the weak soldier and “that his bones wounded him” in the physical sense, the convict’s “bones are consumed... With wishes the past to undo” as an emotional torment which could be ominous to physical illness (21,22). The next few lines indicate that even if the convict’s emotional suffering is “appeased,” he still then “must repose/ In the comfortless vault of disease” (31,32).

It is the confining environment of the prison that unsettles the narrator after looking at the vastness of nature in the beginning of the poem. The imprisonment marks the decay and death of the convict’s emotions as well as physical health. In “The Discharged Soldier,” the soldier is not literally confined, but his description standing near the village shares characteristics as that of a prisoner: “He appeared/ Forlorn and desolate, a man cut off/ From all his kind, and more than half-detached/ From his own nature.” The soldiers of the time mostly contracted the diseases due to being abroad or travelling in confined spaces; however, the comparison of the returned soldier now diseased and the prisoner at the onset of ill health back at home expresses Wordsworth’s recognition of the horrors both abroad and on the mainland.

Megan McGrath
ENGL 521
Debbie Lee
10/7/10

Colonial Anxieties: Sailors and Disease in Austen's *Persuasion*

My research recently has been focusing on disease as a constant anxiety shaping European lifestyles. I have discussed in a previous week the notion of the tropicalization of disease: the European idea that hot, muggy, wet environments, such as one might find in areas being colonized at the time, like the West Indies, are the sources of disease. When European colonizers began to notice that most of their men died in such foreign, tropical places, they deemed such environments unhealthy to the European body. As a result, the tropicalization of disease led to anxieties about diet, morality, and environment, to name a few.

Jane Austen's novels reflect many of these anxieties in different characters: for example, Mr. Woodhouse is an example of the fear that overeating is unwholesome to the European, for it leads to sickness and immorality. In *Persuasion* (1817), my personal favorite of Austen's novels, Sir Walter Elliot is another older gentleman who has humorous anxieties and eccentricities. Sir Walter is laughably vain. He is extremely concerned with looks and dress, and he particularly despises sailors, and the Navy as a profession, because they apparently are not attractive enough for him. Interestingly enough, this "unattractiveness" which sailors possess stems from Sir Walter's own fear of colonial disease, as well as his fear of the fall of the aristocracy.

Focusing on the fear of disease, I turn our attention to a conversation in which other characters are trying to persuade Sir Walter to allow a Navy officer to let his estate. Sir Walter refuses, explaining the offensive characteristics of a sailor's body, and also mentioning that sailors "are all knocked about, and exposed to every climate, and every weather, till they are not fit to be seen" (20). This is where we note the fear Sir Walter has of the places a sailor has been, and what the sailor could have been in contact with while there. He does not mention disease, but refers to it through his comments about the climate and weather, suggesting that there are bad kinds of both.

Trying to persuade Sir Walter that sailors are good people and encounter as much stress and aging as someone in any other profession, Mrs. Clay urges that, "even the clergyman, you know, is obliged to go into infected rooms, and expose his health and looks to all the injury of a poisonous atmosphere" (20). This "poisonous atmosphere" is exactly the kind of tropicalized environment, this time local, in which Europeans feared disease, thus affirming my suggestion that Sir Walter meant disease when he mentioned the climate and weather a sailor is exposed to.

Mrs. Clay goes on to propose that only those who are wealthy and don't need to work or leave the country for any reason, "hold the blessings of health and good appearance to the utmost" (21). Here, Mrs. Clay is upholding the British attitude that only temperate climates like England's could maintain British health. This example of health versus sickness, beauty versus repulsiveness, and youth versus age all being related to the environment and climate one is in certainly upholds an anxiety of colonial "otherness." Sir Walter fears not the wrinkles on a soldier's brow, but what foreign substance may be

lingering there. All the while, Austen is poking fun at the anxieties of the aristocracy, and she is clearly a champion of Navy officers. She herself seems to believe that sickness and ugliness should not be feared from contact with other lands, but the real fear should be the sheer idleness of many in her own country.

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Mike Hilbert
10/7/10
ENGL 521

Annotation #6: Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"

As I have pondered the topics of reality and mediation in the form of art, questions have come to mind about the role of poetry in experiencing nature. The Romantics also had these questions in mind while composing poetry. There is, in some Romantic poetry, a sort of experiment with reality and nature. Keats's poem "Ode to a Nightingale" is a collection of thoughts about an actual version of something versus an ideal or mediated version.

The mediation in this poem comes from the speaker's use of such substances as "some dull opiate" and "a beaker full of the warm south" (3, 15). Mentions of "hemlock," "Lethe-wards," and a "draught of vintage" further the idea that the speaker is trying to enter some other state of mind. In this way, substances are used as a mediation between reality and an "otherness" necessary to experience nature in a new and better way.

The speaker refers to the nightingale as a "light-winged dryad of the trees" instead of the thing it really is: a nightingale (7). The speaker, senseless from a string of mind-numbing senses, is now seeing nature as something he wants it to be, rather than something real. The scene is "Darkling," further blurring the reality of both sense and object, leaving the speaker to imagine what is going on and seeing only what he can imagine as real.

The use of magical imagery is another tool Keats uses to blind the speaker from reality. The speaker talks about "Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn" (69, 70). This, along with the speaker's loss of sense due to substance, underscores the validity of the speaker, and thus the reality of what he describes. The nightingale becomes something imagined in fairy tales, under the cover of darkness, and blurred by the effects of substance.

The nightingale then exists to the speaker only as something perfected through mediation. Nature, to the speaker, is perhaps an unsubstantial version of his imagination. Why experience something as flawed as a real nightingale when substances, darkness, and imagination can make the real thing better? Why settle for something less than perfect when one can experience the ideal version of something in a vision or dream?

Aaron Moe
Dr. Lee
Annotation VI
07 October 2010

Wordsworth's Cottages

I don't think that we as presenters nor we as a group fully articulated the ecological import of Wordsworth's cottages. Perhaps this is because of a rushed application or incomplete application of terms that are supposed to help illuminate and may have ended up obfuscating the ideas. In the *Guide to the District of the Lakes*, Wordsworth juxtaposes two buildings, the more ancient cottages and the newer buildings "rising as they do from the summits of naked hills." The "craving for prospect"--this rush to own--"has rendered it impossible that [the new] buildings...should in most instance be ornamental to the landscape" (7). Instead of being ornamental, the new buildings demarcate their presence, sticking out egregiously.

The new architecture of the new buildings sharply contrasts Wordsworth's description of the ancient cottages, which are ornamental because of their blurred edges: "both the coverings and sides of the houses have furnished places of rest for the seeds of lichens, mosses, ferns, and flowers. Hence buildings, which in their very form call to mind the *processes of nature*, do thus, clothed in part with a vegetable garb, appear to be received into the bosom of the living principle of things..." (4-5, italics added). I emphasize the *processes of nature* because of how radical the concept of a home partaking in these processes is. What are these processes? Judging by his description, these processes involve decay and regeneration. Since the older cottages are "received into the bosom of the living principle of things"--since they are in the midst of decay--they are closer to nature. The new buildings do not bring to mind the processes of nature. They construct a firm border between the home and nature rather than allowing that border to be an osmotic borderland, a energy transfer, a blurring of the boundary.

In my last annotation and in our class discussion, many people spoke of bioregionalism, but I think that we need to realize that for Wordsworth, bioregionalism includes decay. In Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage" decay is felt even more. Perhaps this is because the poem explores the gradual process of nature working into a cottage and a life, turning that matter into a regenerative power, even if that process is looked upon by the Pedlar as melancholic: "Meanwhile her poor hut / Sunk into decay" (ln 476-77).

But here is a crucial nugget. These cottages confront us with the idea of decay and the importance of decay to the Romantic imagination. Many people do not want this process (except, perhaps, people who compost). Many people want the regenerative process and only if it is clean. Our city parks clean up dying or dead trees before they even have a chance to begin decaying. Wordsworth valued a home that exhibited this process, and if the goal of ecocriticism is to explore how literature reflects and helps shape human-environment interactions (as Hutchings and many other ecocritics argue), then these reflections upon cottages provide a fertile ground of discussion--a discussion that challenges the status quo of how a home interacts with nature. Instead of being a firm border between human respite and nature, the home ought to be a borderland vulnerable to the processes of nature.

Scott Offutt
English 521/Debbie Lee
Annotation VI
October 4, 2010

"A secret correspondence with our heart": Correspondence and Invention in Shelley's
"On Love"

The progression from desire for a perfect partner to sympathetic conversation between dissimilar minds guides Percy Shelley to dwell on love in solitude in "On Love." By closing with an appreciation for correspondences between rational creatures and their surroundings, Shelley gestures toward an idea of love as a creative act. Unlike natural love, which promotes generation, Shelley's love appears to be in subtle competition with normal human affections, to support sympathies that are not innate to human sensibilities, but which effect a communication with the world. This affection is at once worldly and otherworldly, unnatural, yet paradoxically celebratory of the natural. I regard Shelley's love as a profoundly aesthetic feeling, and an act that aestheticizes, while fostering lucidity in the perception of physical conditions.

Shelley begins his contemplation by associating feelings of emotional alienation with the experience of being in a foreign country. The attempt to "unburden my inmost soul" to "other men" reduces love to an impossibility, as "I have found my language misunderstood like one in a distant and savage land" (Shelley 1080). Desire—that "something within us which, from the instant that we live and move, thirsts after its likeness," which "creates the ideal prototype of everything excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man"—obtains in a sense of total alienation from the species (1080). Alternatively, "understanding," the "antitype" of desire, occurs when people feel love for one another through "the meeting with an understanding capable of clearly enter into the deductions of our own," that is, translate the communications between their "inmost" selves (Ibid). The first feeling is more abstract than the second, more fanciful, deriving from an unsatisfied want—yet the second feeling is also unrealistic. The "exquisite" harmony of two voices in unmitigated conversation constitutes "the invisible and unattainable point to which love tends" (1080-81). Love for fellow human beings—including natural, generative love—amounts to an insubstantial substitution for real affection, and real sympathy. Among people, the creation of personal, private cultures reduces "love" to an illusory value attached almost arbitrarily to certain positive sensations.

Rather than lament the failure of conventional love, Shelley argues for an essentially creative sympathy in lieu of lesser feelings. It is in "solitude" that the poetic mind forms its great connections and communications, its "understanding" of "the motions of the very leaves of spring in the blue air," which contains "the secret correspondence with our heart" (1080-81). Shelley describes this "correspondence" both as a "want" and a "power" because love for the world and the creation of sympathy with the world accommodate one another (1081). As the mind establishes bonds with the world in solitude, its affection deepens. Shelley's love reaches the peak of its refinement when practiced in isolation, and then transcends mere feeling, enhancing perception, and marrying thought to experience in the dissolution of the limits of impression.

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Stephanie Lyells

Engl 521

10/7/10

Annotation of William Wordsworth's *Crossing the Alps*

This is the second poem I have considered in my exploration of Wordsworth's treatment of nature, and I am not sure if my analysis provides any definitive impressions or a space to establish a hypothesis I can later explore. That being said, I will take this paper as a place to peruse my various mental meanderings rather than make assertions. A similar theme that occurs in this poem as well as in *Stepping Westward* is an emphasis on the visual—the emphasis on the aesthetic of imagination that the mind creates—when Wordsworth is exploring and reconnoitering across the country. In my annotations on the page, I often refer to this as the inner landscape; it is the landscape that is imbued with created, individual perceptions and meanings, inextricably related to the imaginative powers of the individual. From what I can see in *Crossing the Alps*, Wordsworth appraises this inner landscape and the imaginative powers of the mind as essential to experiencing the sublime and dominant to his relationship with nature.

This is first seen in Wordsworth's account of first seeing Mont Blanc; Wordsworth expresses his disappointment: "To have a soulless image on the eye which had usurped upon a living thought that never more could be" (lines 454-456)¹. This line is shocking in the absolute characterization of "soulless", even though Wordsworth is talking about an image. However, perhaps this is an essential thing to note—that Wordsworth comments upon Mont Blanc as an image rather than a living ecosystem, a biosystem teeming with dynamic life and personality. Rather than considering the nuances of the ecosystem that can be found on Mont Blanc, Wordsworth takes the experience back to the perusing view of the traveler—the appropriative gaze. Moreover, the use of the term "usurped" occurs towards the end of the poem when Wordsworth once again considers how reality usurps the power of the imagination—even though Wordsworth puts more substance in the insubstantial potency of imagination. While the image of a real summit only appears as a "soulless image" because it does not exceed the expectations built up in his imagination, the imagination is a generator, a "living thought".

Comparably, there are allusions to Pope within this poem and the construct of nature as God's body. Interestingly, though, Wordsworth often describes nature as characterized by stagnancy—not as a living ecosystem. He illustrates Charmouney as having "dumb cataracts" and a "motionless array of mighty waves" (lines 49, 49). The woods he passes through are "woods decaying, never to be decayed, the stationary blasts of waterfalls" (lines 557-558). These images reify the concept of nature as an aesthetic "image". Wordsworth illustrates nature as if he is creating a painting that can only capture a singular moment and the surface of what nature seems to be. While this is how Wordsworth visually seems to assess and relay his interaction with the environment, towards the end of the poem he characterizes the environment as having a voice and a face. The rocks "muttered close upon [their] ears,/ Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside/ As if a voice were in them" and they were "all like working s of one

¹ Wordsworth, William. "Crossing the Alps" Ed. Wu, Duncan. *Romanticism: An Anthology*. 3rd ed. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006. 553-555. Print.

mind, the features/ of the same face” (lines 562-564, lines 568-9). While seemingly creating a holistic image of nature as a body, a body that is able to speak to Wordsworth (and maybe be the presence of God’s soul within nature), nature is contradictorily an inert image that Wordsworth enhances with his imagination. I am not sure how these two perceptions collaborate as a cohesive construct; how can a soulless image later speak to Wordsworth? Can nature speak to Wordsworth in the immediate moment, or does it take the reflection that Wordsworth takes (“Imagination! Lifting up itself”) that allows Wordsworth to recover enough to “recognize their glory” (lines 525, 532)? The reality of nature—the evident life in an ecosystem—does not have enough glory to evoke Wordsworth to wonder. Rather, imagination must lift up Wordsworth.

Susan L. Duba
ENGL 521
Annotation # 5
7 October 2010

Two Approaches to Simplicity:
Keats' and Hunt's Grasshopper and Cricket Poems

Sometimes poetry can be about something simple. That is the case with two poems that resulted when John Keats and James Henry Leigh Hunt competed in a "sonnet-writing competition" (Wu 801). These poems may have the same subject, but they have completely different approaches and styles. I've read Keats' poems before, but have never even heard of Hunt, yet the poem by the latter was the first one I found when perusing the anthology. Both poems are sonnets, but have different rhyme schemes. The first eight lines of each follow an ABBA scheme, while the last six in Keats' poem is CDECDE and Hunt's follows CDCDCD. The rhyming in Keats' appears to be more obvious and provides a better flow. When reading poetry, I hardly examine the rhyming pattern, but it was rather obvious in these because I was able to view them side by side as they were printed in *The Examiner* (Wu).

The titles are the first hint at the differences between the two poems, with only one word difference. That leads into the first line of the poem, which sets the pace and tone of each. Keats' poem refers to "poetry" (1) in the first line, while Hunt's jumps right in with a reference to the "Green little vaulter" (1). Keats' piece has a mature and more poetically sophisticated tone that is continued throughout. Hunt's first line implies that what is to come will be playful and lighthearted.

Keats refers to these small creatures as the "poetry of the earth" (1), beginning with the "grasshopper" (5) that is "never done/With his delights" (6-7). Though the "birds are faint" (2), the grasshopper continues on, ever persistent. The poem shifts then, to mention once again that the "poetry of earth is ceasing never" (9) as he introduces the cricket, though this part of the poem covers the "winter" (10) season, rather than the summer in the beginning. He rounds out his poem by bringing it back to the grasshopper "among some grassy hills" (14).

Hunt begins with the grasshopper, and compares it to "bees [that] lag at the summoning brass" (4). He also chose not to refer to the grasshopper and cricket by name, but instead uses nicknames, like the "warm little housekeeper" (5) to refer to the cricket. This helps enhance the cheerfulness of the poem. The last line covers the seasons of "summer and winter" (14) just as Keats' had throughout.

These two poets took a simple and earthy subject and created two entirely different pieces. Though Keats' might be more refined and have the Keats name attached to it, my preference is Hunt's piece. The simplicity and playfulness brings the small creatures and their world alive. His last word sums up the overall feel of the piece – "Mirth" (14). Simple, but beautiful.

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