

Jenna Leeds
Professor Lee
English 521
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Vathek: William Beckford's Unintentional Support of Racial Equality

Known as a novel premised upon the notion of white superiority, William Beckford's *Vathek* relies upon the tropes of disability and animalistic imagery to display a subordinate black race. Beckford denies his black characters names, intact bodies, and high-ranking societal positions in an attempt to underline what he hopes to be considered as impossible differences between the races. Appearing to penalize his black characters by giving each a disability, Beckford inadvertently liberates them and grants them humanizing characteristics, essentially building a case for racial equality. To be sure, Beckford's intention is certainly not to promote progressive thoughts of racial equality; however, such notions of equality are motivated by his overcompensation of assigning flaws and deformities to *Vathek*'s black characters.

Within the entirety of his novel, Beckford awards just one black character a name, leaving the rest to be known as generalizations such as "the Ethiopian wife" or "the negresses." Bababalouk, though granted a name, is stripped of his male anatomy and thus of his normative representation of masculinity; he is a eunuch. Because Bababalouk is already deformed and therefore neutralized, Beckford gives him an identity. Giving Bababalouk a name reveals Beckford's confidence that his contemporaries would still overlook Bababalouk's value as a human and as a man. Reiterating Bababalouk's status as a eunuch, he is described as "... having been spared the cares as well as the honor of paternity" (28). Using the word "honor" implies a sense of pride and integrity associated with procreating, however, Beckford also implies that procreating is a burden through stating that Bababalouk was "spared." Inadvertently, he offers the idea that Bababalouk's role as a eunuch liberates him from the societal pressures to sire offspring and participate in heterosexual love as well as the responsibilities and burdens that come with children, perhaps hinting at his own personal life and values. Within Beckford's lifetime, he not only professed that he did not want children, but he also took Kitty, a thirteen-year-old boy, as a lover until he was severely criticized and eventually rejoined heteronormative society and practices. Through this display of jealousy, Beckford accidentally creates a space in which members of the black, and supposedly inferior, race are able to maintain enviable qualities and therefore establish themselves as equals.

Unlike the rest of the characters who are identified as black from their first introduction, Bababalouk's race is not mentioned until after his disability is defined; *Vathek* calls him "My dear black," emphasizing not only that a racial and anatomical difference exists between *Vathek* and Bababalouk, but also that Bababalouk holds some value to *Vathek* (41). The phrase "my dear" implies a sort of intimacy that would not be found in a relationship that held no value, especially when discrepancies of race and class exist. Displaying an intimate friendship between a white man of social importance and a black eunuch slave, Beckford, again, creates a space in which interracial friendships and racial equality can operate.

However, despite the fact that Beckford depicts an intimacy between Bababalouk and *Vathek*, he continuously and consciously degrades Bababalouk through the use of animalistic imagery in an attempt to emphasize that each character is not equal. Beckford portrays Bababalouk, "... whose olfactory nerves were more familiarized to magical odours," attempting

to save the lives of the inhabitants of Samarah (33). Although he must rely on his animalistic sense of smell for survival, he recognizes a danger and vocalizes his concerns. Viewing Bababalouk as an inferior in terms of race and anatomy, the inhabitants of Samarah ignore his warnings and proceed to ridicule him. Beckford attempts to exemplify how a member of the black race should be treated when they assume a role of leadership through the reactions of the white collective. However, because the inhabitants of Samarah proceed to die in the very fire that Bababalouk had warned them about, Beckford's intention clearly fails. Instead, he supports a progressive idea of equality and intelligence; he accidentally encourages the notion that respect should transcend skin color, for if the inhabitants of Samarah had listened to Bababalouk, they would have lived.

Although maiming and deforming his black characters allows Beckford to seemingly neutralize them, he leaves one black character's body fully intact. However, he relies upon the character's sex as a means to undermine this victory. Beckford plays upon heteronormative society's expectations for women as he uses the Ethiopian wife to exemplify the animalistic physicality of the entire black race. During her only appearance within the novel, she "... threw [Vathek] upon her shoulder like a sack of dates... [and] set off, with no small expedition, considering the weight of her burden" (48). The phrase "considering the weight of her burden" refers not only to the man she carries on her back, but also to her role as one woman representing the entire black race. Though there are a group of Ethiopian wives, "for [Vathek] delighted in variety," she is the representative chosen to characterize them as a whole (48). Though the Ethiopian wife may not be bodily maimed or disfigured, Beckford attempts to impugn her identity as a woman, as well as any chance for heteronormative societal acceptance, through her brute act of physicality. Due to his comment about considering the weight of her burden, Beckford underlines the unnatural strength this woman must have in order to carry a grown man, and further stresses the notion that there is no place for her within their society. However, the very comment about considering the weight of her burden simultaneously asks us to view her as courageous. Through trying to encourage racial inequality, Beckford unknowingly promotes progressive thinking. Before this act of physicality, the Ethiopian wife was anonymous amongst the rest of Vathek's wives; it is this act of physicality that gives her an identity within the novel, something that the majority of the other, white, wives lack.

Because the Ethiopian wife is female, she must adhere to an entirely different set of societal standards than a man or eunuch; while it may be important for a man to be physically able, women must be delicate and fragile and remain in the private sphere. The questioning of the Ethiopian wife's role as a woman allows Beckford to question her humanity altogether. Vathek's other wives serve to represent heteronormative society's interpretation of femininity; although their races are not mentioned, it can be assumed that they have white skin because they are not maimed or deformed. Described immediately after his black wife's act of physicality, the rest of his wives are depicted as women who "just learnt the use of their feet" (48). This juxtaposition serves to show an example of society's archetype of women and how the Ethiopian wife and her physicality are decidedly cast as "other." However, because the Ethiopian wife's act of physicality saved Vathek's life, the juxtaposition of the heroic, black, woman and the women who "just learnt the use of their feet" serves to promote a new version of femininity.

By denying his black characters names and intact bodies, William Beckford seeks to eliminate their humanity as an attempt to eradicate thoughts of racial equality. He paints a vivid, confident, portrayal of subordination; however, the only reason these characters are thrust into positions of obvious inferiority lies within their deformities issued by Beckford himself. Due to

this recognition of the assigning of disabilities, one must also recognize that these disabilities must have been assigned to people that Beckford already believed were equal; if he did not see black members of his society as equals, there wouldn't have been a need to distribute deformities among the black characters of his novel in an effort to depict them as inferior.

Megan McGrath
Engl 521
Debbie Lee
9/1/10

Annotation: Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (published in 1816) claims to be a "vision from a dream" that Coleridge had while he was in an opium-induced sleep. The poem is also claimed to be a fragment because while Coleridge was writing down what he remembered from his dream, he was interrupted by a traveling salesman and never remembered the rest of his dream after speaking to the salesman. The Preface states that the poem was written in 1797, and that, prior to falling asleep, Coleridge had been reading about Kublai Khan from "Purchas's Pilgrimage." The fact that the poem is supposedly based on this Asian figure compliments the Romantic obsession with travel and exploration.

However, exploration is not the most prominent subject of this poem; rather, it is the imagination which the fantastic land Coleridge creates is most likely to describe. Many critics have argued that the fountain emerging from the "chasm" is an image of the process of creativity or imagination. Although I do agree that this image evokes a feeling of breaking through the boundaries of reason, I also cannot help but notice the sexuality of this poem.

The poem starts when a person named Kubla Khan "decrees" that a "pleasure-dome" be built in the very sublime natural environment where, "ALPH, the sacred river, ran/ Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea" (3-5). This "pleasure-dome" is in contrast to the nature surrounding it, as it is a man-made object with walls and boundaries. Yet, a river erupts from the "chasm" nearby and seems to overcome the man-made structures. This eruption is clearly the most sexual part of the poem: "And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,/ As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,/ A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:/ Amid whose swift half-intermitted Burst/ Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,/ Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:/ And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever/ It flung up momentarily the sacred river" (17-24). Quite possibly this passage is describing the process of poetic creativity, but it seems to me to describe the process of reproduction (which is a form of creation as well, of course). The earth has become a panting person, from which a fountain bursts and forms into a life-giving, sacred, flowing river which runs down the caverns into that "sunless sea." Again, this very much sounds like a sexual act with the female caverns and chasms and the very phallic "pleasure-dome" which has been erected. The river flows into a sea which apparently sunlight cannot reach...and the "sacred river" could represent both the life-giving fluids of the body and of the mind (imagination).

The second stanza describes a vision which comes to the Author after having experienced the fountain saga. He envisions a "damsel with a dulcimer," singing. He notes that if he can continue to hear the singing, he can build this "pleasure-dome." Yet, after claiming to have the ability to build this dome, he suggests that others (his audience, perhaps) will be afraid of what he has made. The notion of the dome as a metaphor for a poem he has created once again comes to mind, and possibly the "haters" are those who

are afraid of the imagination in art. Coleridge is here suggesting that his use of imagination may scare people—it is just that great. The poem ends with this explanation that others will fear the man who created the pleasure dome because, “he on honey-dew hath fed/ And drank the milk of Paradise” (53-54). It is hard to say whether this “milk” is a sexual bodily fluid that his audience is possibly afraid of acknowledging, or whether it is creativity and imagination itself. The poem, though it is supposedly an unfinished “fragment,” seems to end pretty well where it does. It leaves us impressed with the “risk-taker” Coleridge’s use of imagination, and also a bit of fear which is very sublime.

ENG 521
Daniela Miranda
September 2nd, 2010

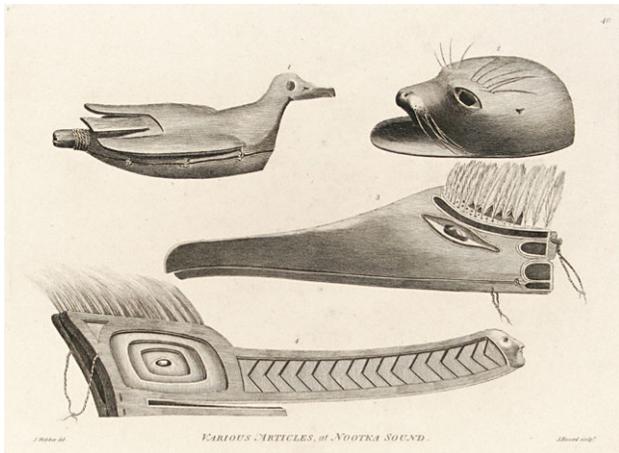
Annotation 1

While reading Banks' letters and Fulford, Lee, and Kitson's chapter on Banks' life, what caught my attention the most was how engraving played a pivotal role during the Romantic period, not only as a means of artistic expression but also as an instrument used to systematize and thus appropriate the knowledge that was being brought from faraway lands. Therefore, I started looking for engravings related to Cook's travels in particular, since they were some of the most important of the time. I came across several from his third travel that I found particularly interesting. The one in the right, for instance, depicts artifacts found in Nootka Sound, an inlet in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Vancouver Island. The reason why I find it interesting is that, to me, it seems like a clear example of how the empire, in this case England, used engraving to appropriate what had inspired wonder in the original explorers. In fact, it is a way, as Leask puts it, to make these objects "mobile, stable (so that they can be moved back and forth without decay or distortion resulting from descontextualization) and combinable. . ." (20).

Another reason why I found the engraving interesting is that it has a museum-like quality to it, probably because of the way the different objects are systematically organized, almost as if they were on display. According to Leask, "museums, and to a greater extent popular exhibitions, shared with travel narratives the aspiration to make distant lands present; given that spatial and temporal distance are forms of absence, for which the presentness of the artifact (or narrative) itself must compensate" (30). Consequently, I would argue that another instrument in

addition to museums, popular exhibitions, and travel narratives that was used during this time to compensate for this spatial absence was engraving. In fact, it could even be argued that engravings are responsible for a lot of the travel narrative's appeal (after all, one picture is worth more than a thousand words), they were used as a way to legitimize any discoveries made during the travel, and they were also a way to preserve this knowledge and put it on display for the public's curiosity and wonder.

From the voyages of Captain Cook. Various Articles at Nootka Sound. Plate 40 for Voyage to the Pacific Ocean... 1776-1780, recording the Third Voyage of Captain Cook. Engraving by J. Record. Plate mark: 8 x 11 inches. Sheet: 11 x 14 inches.



Devon Bailey
521-Annotation
2 September 2010

Revitalizing England

I wonder to what extent viewing of scenery and natural treasures brought back from explored lands created the sublimity and picturesque aims of the Romantic Era. Banks is clearly working diligently to un-cover as much of the hidden natural beauties of the world as possible. The accounts discussed in Nigel Leask's "Cycles of Accumulation, Aesthetics of Curiosity, and Temporal Exchange" reveal the dedication and even obsession of Banks as he catalogs, illustrates, and publishes the findings from all of his personal and funded sea voyages.

At the surface of these voyages is the notion of romantic heroes who go off and collect evidence of new wonders, while beneath the frills of published tomes and natural history exhibits lay a lust for the aesthetic that "seemed to undermine a rational and 'philosophical' appropriation of the foreign" (Leask 16). With the cover of the Royal Academy of Science, Banks is able to claim the role of scientist, but really delve himself into every aspect of appropriation. Not only does Banks help to catalog thousands of new plants and animals, but also he realizes the beauty and desire that are induced through viewing the tropical islands of Tahiti. It seems that the curiosity and then awe that is inspired by seeing the paintings/engravings of Tahiti for the first time is the impetus for the movement in literature towards the sublime and picturesque.

Leask describes the duality of the voyages when he writes "eighteenth-century travel was required to be both curious and useful" (Leask 19). The words 'curious' and 'useful' seem to be opposites, if not unlikely pairs, since up until now endeavors of acquiring knowledge were directed by a method, most often the scientific method. But now with the unlimited possibilities that lay across the waters, once direct methods are left up to the discretion of individual voyages. This fact made Banks the most powerful person in England at the turn of the century, since he funded and synthesized the voyages being conducted on behalf of England.

The most detrimental element to Banks's efforts is the fact that the foreign objects he brings back to England become "objects of curiosity," and just their labeling as such changes their role and usefulness. Instead of being artifacts to progress the English society, they become "value[d] as collectibles depended upon their removal from the economic circuit," which "endowed their possessors with symbolic capital" (Leask 27). This move from scientific, physical, or monetary value to the symbolic is what marks the shift in literature, as well, to the abstract and visceral. The English citizens were enthralled by the tales of Tahiti that Cook and Banks returned with, but some feared that the "licentiousness" of the tales and images are not meant for 'proper' Christian citizens. Despite this, Banks's accounts continue to be consumed, and instinct overrules "method" when the popular literature transitions to Romanticism and the sublime.

Through an assessment of all the readings it appears that Banks's accounts of Tahiti, the sexuality, plants, flowers, food, scenery, worked to shock English society and reveal to them a different way of living than they had known. Instead of stuffy Christian morals they were given the opportunity to indulge, explore, and be curious. It seems like the English regained the ability to be human, in the carnal sense. From the mental images they recreated through reading the travel narratives, prelapsarian time seemed to re-emerge for the English in the descriptions of Tahiti. As far as I'm concerned, Banks's funding and work revitalized, through color and passion, a culturally strict and waning England.

Joelle Moen
Engl 521, Lee
1 Sept 2010
Poetry Annotation #1

In the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth claims that he has used “language really used by men. . . whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way” (3). Although the diction of many of the poems contained in the *Lyrical Ballads* may be “language really used by men,” I’d be hard-pressed to say that the syntax of, for example, “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” is anything but common. However, in the poem “Daffodils” Wordsworth seems to strike a better balance between “real language” and “ordinary things. . . presented. . . in an unusual way” (3). Most interestingly, in “Daffodils” Wordsworth shows through the literary elements how poetry can recreate the recollection of a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (10).

First, “Daffodils” seem to reflect the “language really used by men” because, on comparison to many of Wordsworth’s other poems, the imagery in “Daffodils” is much simpler (although not simplistic). Most of the images of the poem are created with the rather straightforward techniques of simile, hyperbole, and personification. Among the similes are “lonely as a cloud” (1) and “continuous as the stars that shine” (7). For hyperbole, the persona witnesses “at a glance” “Ten thousand” (11) daffodils “stretched in never-ending line” (8). Finally, personification usually describes the daffodils as the flutter and dance, (6) toss “their heads in sprightly dance,” (12) and are “jocund company” (16).

The most interesting part of the poem is that through the rhyme scheme, Wordsworth shows how poetry is a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in tranquility” (10). Each of the stanzas is composed of a sestet with the rhyme scheme of ABABCC, as shown by the first stanza:

I WANDERED lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (1-6)

The pattern continues through the first three stanzas with new rhymes. However, in the last two lines of the final stanza, Wordsworth returns to a rhyme from the first stanza (JKJKBB).

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. (19-26)

In other words, as the persona in the poem remembers and thinks about the daffodils, the rhyme scheme returns to the earlier period in the poem. Indeed, the persona feels pleasure not just at seeing the daffodils the first time, but also from remembering them as they “flash upon the inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude” (23-24). The rhyme scheme shows that by taking us back to the beginning of the poem to the first description of the original incident.

Editor Duncan Wu claims that “Daffodils” is considered one of Wordsworth’s “most felicitous poems” (546). Happily, it also demonstrates two of Wordsworth’s most interesting propositions about poetry: that important ideas can be conveyed in simple language and that emotions recollected in tranquility provide are among those important ideas.

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Erica Olson
Thursday, September 2

In “She Walks in Beauty,” a short poem written in 1814, Lord Byron writes of a woman who has “a mind at peace with all below, / A heart whose love is innocent” (17-18). Just what is this “below” with which she is at peace? And why does “mad, bad” Byron so often create images of the feminine as sweet and pure, untouchable by vicious intent?

Byron was not simply an evil womanizer out to destroy hearts. For him the symbol of the woman, rather than always representing erotic temptation, was often a refuge, a realm of light in place of the darkness that often engulfed him. In the Third Canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, 1816, he writes, “In my youth’s summer I did sing of one, / The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind” (19-20). The fictional alter-ego’s “dark mind” is, of course, Byron’s as well. Byron explains how he has driven himself to the deepest, darkest places of human experience because he has repeatedly attempted to “pierc[e] the depths of life” and has thus “grown aged in this world of woe / (In deeds not years)” (37-8). He has tried to have such intense emotional experiences that he has drunk too deeply from “Life’s enchanted cup” (71):

“Yet must I think less wildly. I *have* thought / Too long and darkly till my brain became, / In its own eddy, boiling and o’erwrought, / A whirling gulf of fantasy and flame; / And thus, untaught in youth my heart to tame, / My springs of life were poisoned. ‘Tis too late!” (55-59)

Why does he feel impelled to experience life so intensely? It is his impulse as a poet, of course: “‘Tis to create, and in creating live / A being more intense, that we endow / With form our fancy, gaining as we give / The life we image – even as I do now” (46-9). Byron seeks poetic ideas that seem to him almost otherworldly experiences. He likens himself to one who stands “searching through the crowd to find / Fit speculation,” in “wonder-works of God and Nature’s hand” (87-90). Part of Byron’s problem is that he imagines himself so far apart from the rest of mankind that he unconsciously alienates himself from worldly happiness:

“He knew himself the most unfit / Of men to herd with man, with whom he held / Little in common... He would not yield dominion of his mind / To spirits against whom his own rebelled, / Proud though in desolation – which could find / A life within itself, to breathe without mankind.” (105-8).

It is heavenly, higher realms that he seeks, away from “earth” and “human frailties”:

“Like the Chaldean, he could watch the stars / Till he had peopled them with beings bright / As their own beams... Could he have kept his spirit to that flight / He had been happy; but this clay will sink / Its spark immortal, envying it the light / To which it mounts, as if to break the link / That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its brink” (118-26).

He can’t help climbing, he can’t help falling; and he is plunged into this harrowing experience again and again. It is like when he “awak[es] with a start” from contemplating the image of his daughter and finds that “The waters heave around me, and on high / The winds lift up their voices. I depart / Whither I know not...” (5-8).

Oh, but his daughter! The first line of the Canto he addresses to his infant daughter Ada, whom he has barely known: “Is thy face like thy mother’s, my fair child?” (1). The mother, Lady Byron, has left Byron and taken full custody of the daughter, has made the husband to feel “hounded out of England by the bad publicity whipped up by his wife” (Wu 852 fn.). Yet the image of his newborn daughter is a cooling salve for Byron’s inward fire:

“What am I? Nothing. But not so art thou, / Soul of my thought, with whom I
traverse earth, / Invisible but gazing, as I glow / Mixed with thy spirit, blended
with thy birth, / And feeling still with thee in my crushed feelings’ dearth.” (50-
4).

Lady Byron’s experience of the horrors of living with Lord Byron shows only one side of the man. In trying to be a great creator Byron has had to go to the deepest places, ask the deepest questions, and has thus poisoned the light spirit within him that seeks happiness. But he is not wholly cruel, cold, and heartless. He also has a clean image of the woman, the feminine ideal. The woman in “She Walks In Beauty” who has “a mind at peace with all below” does not know the darkness and is immune to the pain found in the deep underworld (the “below”) of poetic experience. The terrible irony for Byron is that he worships the woman whom the dark abyss cannot hurt, and yet when he looks on this woman he can’t help but be plunged into the “vortex” of these intensely emotional thoughts again:

“Who can curiously behold / The smoothness and the sheen of Beauty’s cheek, /
Nor feel the heart can never all grow old? / Who can contemplate fame through
clouds unfold / The star which rises o’er her steep, nor climb? Harold, once more
within the vortex, rolled / On with the giddy circle, chasing Time” (91-8).

Kyle Thomas
ENG 521
9/2/10

Annotation 1: "Lines Written in Early Spring," Wordsworth, 1798.

As I'm sure we will discuss much more in depth the main characteristics of Romantic poetry, I find that Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring" concisely demonstrates the notion of the poet observing nature as a medium to meditate inwardly about the human soul. This poem simply, but accurately presents the distinctly Romantic style of searching the self by way of nature to discover truths about the world and the individual.

Characteristically of Wordsworth, he situates himself in a relaxed position and invites all of the sensory impressions he has of the landscape to enter into his mind. By hearing the "thousand blended notes," he attempts to synthesize all of the sounds he hears and the correspondences that elicit his state of mind (1). Wordsworth's recognition that nature is somehow evoking his thoughts and feelings is stated here: "To her fair works did nature link/The human soul that through me ran..." (5,6). The human soul in the perception of the Romantics can be equated to the Oversoul often attributed to the Transcendentalists. Their belief was that the individual has the capability to discover eternal truths only within themselves and the meditation of introspection. Nature is seen as an acting agent that communicates universal truths to the individual which can be accessed through looking inward to the Self.

The tone of the poem is immediately expressed as sad in that the poet says "it grieved my heart to think/ What man has made of man," (7,8). Here it is stated that a tone of sadness is the effect that nature has evoked in the individual. As the poet was pondering about the characteristics and beauty of nature, the tone strangely shifts to the concern with humanity; it's almost as if simultaneously the correlation of nature and thought have resulted in a state of melancholy.

It is interesting to think that in our course we will be discussing the issues of travel, exploration, and how the advances in these areas have affected the writings of the Romantics. I think in this poem, Wordsworth expresses the feelings that have been attributed to the overall era of taking control over new lands, slavery and captivity, and the negative outcomes of these movements.

Scott Offutt
English 521/Debbie Lee
Annotation I
August 31, 2010

Embodiment and Obfuscation in *The Book of Urizen*

Fearing death, William Blake's "creator god," Urizen, isolates himself from the harmonious flux of Eternity, before enacting a sequence of divisions that perpetuates the birth and condemnation of all life on Earth. Urizen is no creator; his progeny are the awful result of his attempt to preserve himself from the normal balance of experience. Accordingly, Urizen reflects the pettiness and fallacy of mortal fears, is as much "your reason" in name as in behavior, for his obsessive efforts to control and categorize, to shape and limit, are fundamentally human, and speak to human tendencies. *The Book of Urizen* functions as an indictment, a depiction of a set of circumstances – including, at least partially, the present circumstances of humanity – which demand resolution. In the following study, I intend to evaluate Blake's portrayal of reason in the thoughts and behaviors of the actors in *Urizen*, in order to arrive at a better understanding of the meaning of division in the poem.

The first and second chapters see Urizen commencing his departure from Eternity, a kind of experience that is not inert, but in perpetual transition, and thus troublesome. From the perspective of those Eternals who continue to occupy this state of being, Urizen's exit is a moment of horrifying uncertainty, with the fallen Eternal appearing as a Miltonian "shadow," "unknown, abstracted" (Blake 115.1, 6). Blake repeatedly describes Urizen and his motions as "unknown," both to Eternal reckoning and in principle, for although the first stanza identifies Urizen as "unprolific," he engages with bodies that clearly come from him, "shapes/Bred from his forsaken wilderness,/Of beast, bird, fish, serpent & element" (115.14-16). An obscure performance yields physical forms, by unclear means: Urizen most explicitly "divided, & measur'd/Space by space in his ninefold darkness," yet the precise effects of this action are indeterminate (115.8-9). The Eternal repudiates Eternity and separates, rather than generates, the things of the physical world. His motives, revealed in the second chapter, are petty for a divinity, but entirely too reminiscent of human thought. Urizen longs "for a joy without pain,/For a solid without fluctuation," and asks, "Why will you die O Eternals?/Why live in unquenchable burnings" (116.10-13). In a grim echo of the sacred texts of human religion, he writes "books form'd of metals" containing "the secrets of wisdom," "Laws of peace, of love, of unity," (116.24-25, 34). Urizen seeks control over the uncertainties incorporated into the Eternal *status quo*. By writing, separating, and compassing the comprehensive cloth of Eternity, he encloses himself from the natural order, and facilitates the sorrow of Eternity and the world, culminating in the birth of the "Human shadow," the supreme nightmare of Eternity – from this point, life can continue to multiply unchecked, and the shadow that first haunted the Eternals will triumph – at least, within the limits of physical experience (125.42).

The practice that results from the reason of Urizen – human reason, "our" reason, the thoughts of rational creatures who, like Urizen, suffer from fear and lack of foresight – always leads to separation. The series of lapses that leads to the emergence of humanity is without the innocence or ambition of a creative act. Instead, life results from the

compulsive effort to delimit an uncontrollable force, whether it be Eternal pain, Urizen's madness, or the entirety of physical experience. Division is an attempt to forge boundaries between the subject of fear and the party that chooses, always irrationally and perhaps impulsively, to be afraid. Isolation may offer the illusion of security, but then, in *Urizen*, complete isolation is illusory, and loneliness only exacerbates the pain of the living: "[the sons of Urizen] their thirty cities divided/In form of a human heart" (129.43-44). Humankind arrives at stasis, kept apart from itself and from the greater body of experience by the senses that restrain Urizen, and the shortsightedness that doomed him. Eternal life – complete life, experience at its most whole – is inaccessible. Neither a defense against fear nor a control over the subjects of fear, division leads finally to the restriction of the person.

Urizen's error transcends thought to influence the structure of Eternity and demarcate the physical limits of the senses, provoking a catastrophe that continues to worsen as humanity remains distant from Eternity. Clarity – the moment when the body gives way to the greater whole of experience, or better, the moment of *synthesis* with the Eternal, including all the strictures that trace back to the original fault – never appears as an egress in *The Book of Urizen*. Rather than conceding to the seemingly definite prospect that the poem describes an inescapable state, I choose instead to view *Urizen* as the dramatization of a kind of thought that is easy, and perhaps even inevitable, but not insoluble. In this reading, Blake's Genesis constitutes less of a lamentation than an aggressive medication for a dire problem, a prescription against division, created in response to the viciously uncreative processes of corrupted reason.

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Jacob Hughes
August 31, 2010
Age of Wonder
Annotation 1

I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why. It is altogether against my will that I tell my reason for opposing this contemplated invasion of the Antarctic – with its vast fossil-hunt and its wholesale boring and melting of the ancient ice-cap – and I am the more reluctant because my warning may be in vain.

(H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 179-180)

The wedding-guest sat on a stone,/He cannot choose but hear;/And thus spake on that ancient man,/The bright-eyed mariner

(S.T. Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* 16-19)

Since we're undertaking these annotations with the theme of exploration in mind, I suppose it's only appropriate that I pick up where I left off, *At* (famous horror writer H.P. Lovecraft's) *the Mountains of Madness*. When taking Romantic Ecology years ago, I thought much on space, place, and *being there*—what it meant to be in a place in a particular moment, or set of moments. Though we talked about many places, we spoke mostly as a class about being there, not as much about *getting there*. And where I left off was at the Antarctic (in the form of a seminar paper)—a veritable conceptual borderland, a place that isn't a place but rather a potential, filled with the provocative unknown. But that unknown is dangerous, and as illustrated by Lovecraft's anxiety-ridden quotation above, disaster is an easy companion for promise. Though I don't have the space to go into the details, Lovecraft had some interesting personal baggage concerning the Antarctic, and much of it was cultured by travel writers, especially the accounts of the Wilkes and Ross expeditions respectively. That baggage manifested in the form of horror.

The horrific and the wondrous often occur simultaneously, and manifest from deeply-held cultural anxieties. For Lovecraft, that anxiety concerned both the limitations and the extent of technology's reach over the world—to actually fill in those provocative blanks, in some ways, could serve to blot out the imagination. Conversely, however, exploratory revelations can be just as terrifying themselves as the thought of never discovering anything new.

Thus, the Age of Wonder can be an age of horror. Exploration yields stress which in turn molds our nightmares. Even in a postmodern context, what occurs between normal space and the event horizon has generated speculative terrors (think about the film *Event Horizon* and shiver). Really, any border does. Since I'm setting sail away from the Antarctic (for a while anyway), and moving backwards in time, it seems appropriate to explore where I should've been, and where Lovecraft probably was at some point—not that I'm locking myself in to his modality, of course.

Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* conveys both a sense of fatalistic subjugation to higher powers and a warning against meddling with powers outside of human control. The sea, as such, is the final frontier to us land-walkers. The mariner disrupts a celebration to tell his tale, pulling aside the hapless wedding guest who wants nothing more (at first) to be rid of the old man. The brightness of the wedding celebration juxtaposes with the bright day the mariner's

crew first sets sail: a spectacle of potentiality, a promising start to a promising voyage: “The ship was cheered, the harbor cleared,/Merrily did we drop (21-22). However, that bright potentiality quickly turns to desolation. After being blown by a storm to the south pole, the mariner’s ship finds itself in—where else—the Antarctic: “And now there we came both mist and snow,/And it grew wondrous cold” (51-52). While the virgin snow-scape is promising, it’s also deadly. After Coleridge’s depiction of the ice, enter the famous Albatross through the fog, “As if it had been a Christian soul” (64). And then the mariner promptly kills it, dooming himself and his crew to utter misfortune in strange waters.

While the poem is replete with statements alluding to the unknown—especially in regards to the South Seas and the Antarctic—Coleridge’s mariner shoots and kills a *known* good omen. His utter rejection of the known subsumes him into the horrors of the unknown, losing all bearings. In a way, the rejection of the Albatross is a rejection of the ordinary, despite its incredible appearance in the fog. This rejection of the ordinary good of course destabilizes the entire expedition, and very likely serves in part as a metaphor for exploration anxiety. The instability and grim potentiality of the sea—though once promising—threatens the fabric of the mariner’s life through constant change, just as exploration and scientific discovery potentially threaten stability. Like Lovecraft’s intrepid scientists, the mariner ventured too far, and his assassination of the albatross serves a metaphorical warning against peeking behind too many of the world’s provocative blank regions. Exploration, even to Imperialists, entails more than a modicum of responsibility; those revealed discoveries can have far-reaching impacts.

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Karin Meindl

Professor Debbie Lee

English 521

29 August 2010

Lord Byron's Lament for Passing Youth

In "We'll Go No More A-Roving," Lord Byron assigns typical Romantic values to night and day, moon and sun in order to lament the passing of youth. Whereas neo-classical poetry typically sees night as the onset of death and day as the morning, noon, and afternoon progression of life, Byron prefers with his Romantic contemporaries to see dark as a time of youthful insight and romantic adventure under the auspices of the moon, ruler of love and the imagination, in distinction to the day, time of obligation under the sun, staid ruler of dry duty and mature reason. The poem is simply structured in three short stanzas that present sequent images of time's inevitable erosion of youth's joys. According to information contained in a letter to Thomas Moore in which the poem was first presented, it was the byproduct of Byron's having celebrated the pre-Lenten carnival of his twenty-ninth year.

The initial line in the first stanza provides the reader with a perspective of the poet's state of mind as he ponders the end of youthful dalliances. "So, we'll go no more a-roving/ So late into the night" he proclaims in recognizing that time has brought him to a new phase of life, associating his youthful activities specifically with the pleasures only night may provide. "Though the heart be still as loving" suggests that the altered circumstance derives not from any change in the state of the individual (in other words, the heart still has the capacity to love) but from a change most likely linked to the obligations associated with maturity. The next line, "and the moon be still as bright," reinforces the idea that the world, or nature, has not changed but human perspective and/or necessity has. By the close of the first stanza, Byron has provided the reader with a preliminary understanding of the reason for the inevitable abandonment of nighttime adventures.

This loss is clarified in the middle stanza, in which Byron discusses the passing of time, and his own aging, through images of erosion and weariness: "For the sword outwears its sheath," "the soul wears out the breast," "the heart must pause to breathe," and "love itself have rest." Martial and erotic labors lose their allure, the concerns of the eternal begin to take priority over the physical, the heart tires in its endless competitions and requires pause, and even the idea of love itself grows wearisome. Nothing stays the same, night will end and daytime come, life pass along to the next phase of becoming. Mutability governs.

The final stanza draws the discussion back to the first, essentially repeating its content. "Though the night was made for loving,/ And the day returns too soon," the poet will no longer participate—at least in the same way—in youthful pleasure. The light of day brings the duties and responsibilities of the next phase of life to which he must adhere. Acknowledging that the obligations of the day outweigh the pleasures of the night, the poet finally concedes, "we'll go no

more a-roving / By the light of the moon.” Even though this assertion appears similar to the first two lines of the poem, it does bear some significant difference. “So late into the night,” is now replaced by “In the light of the moon,” which connotes a way of seeing rather than a time of life. The day holds the light of reason and responsibility, but the night holds a light, and a value, of its own. Byron’s final thought suggests that even though we gain a sense of responsibility and maturity with age, we lose those qualities positively associated with the light of the moon, insinuating that youth alone holds the secrets to love and the imagination, which must ultimately concede to reason and duty. Seed time must give way to harvest.

Mike Hilbert
ENGL 521
Annotation #1

A Note on Wordsworth's "The Thorn"

Before I could read (or re-read) Wordsworth's poem "The Thorn," I was struck by the quick note attached to the beginning. Wordsworth tells that this poem "arose out of out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day, a thorn which I had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it" (Wu 375). My curiosity of this little note was enlarged by the fact that Wordsworth had passed this particular bush perhaps hundreds of times without giving it a second glance. There had to be a storm in order for him to be motivated to create this poem. Wordsworth's aim of making this thorn "an impressive object" could never have happened if it weren't for the storm.

The storm in this poem has a twofold purpose. It acts as a sort of "nature catalyst" to the already natural hawthorn bush. The "naturalness" of the thorn on a bright, sunny day was not enough to warrant a poem. Nature, in this case, needs a helping hand to be inspirational. Knowledge of this storm supplies the reader, much as it did to Wordsworth upon actually seeing the thorn in the storm, with an excitement about how the storm changed the bush. The reader, after reading the introductory note, is intrigued by the thought of what Wordsworth calls "impressive effects out of simple elements" (Wu 508). How was this storm able to change the thorn so much that it helped create a widely canonized poem? Why was the nature of the thorn not enough to warrant a poem? And what story might Wordsworth tell in the coming lines? Are the words of the poem sufficient enough to stir the passions of readers, or is the storm as necessary to the reading of the poem as it was to the writing of the poem?

The storm also serves as a supernatural force. It descends upon the thorn in all its supernatural spookiness, and forces ideas into the minds of passersby— ideas of death, sorrow, and misery. Obviously, the storm casts a shadow on the situation that is at once unhappy and inspirational. The supernatural force of the storm can also be taken as quite literally super natural. Wordsworth admits to composing this poem "by some invention" of the mind. In this way, the storm acts as a mystical, higher power to provide inspiration for fictional accounts. The combination of the supernatural storm and the natural thorn bush combine to make an awesome "other-worldly" oddity of nature about which any plain Joe could compose verse.

Perhaps the most curious aspect about this little note about the storm is the question it brought to my mind about the importance of the knowledge of the storm to a reader. Wordsworth has made it clear that without the storm, he would never have seen the thorn bush as something worthy of a poem. My question is, does the reader also need the storm to read this poem properly? What if someone were to read it without prior knowledge of the storm? Would it have the same effect? Wordsworth speaks of "the power by which pleasure and surprise are excited by sudden varieties of situation" (Wu 508). If this "sudden variety of situation" was not known by a reader, would he still feel that powerful pleasure and surprise? I believe not.

Aaron Moe
Dr. Lee
Annotation I
01 September 2010

On Merwin, Keats, Shelley

W. S. Merwin's "Chord" (1988) encapsulates a tension within the Romantic period between two perspectives: nature as commodity (made possible by travel and exploitation) and nature in its mythic proportions (nature as a separate being). As a "chord" is made up of several simultaneous notes, so Merwin's poem captures several dissonant notes, for while Keats (and Shelley) created their poetics of nature-as-being (Shelley traveled to Mont Blanc, which helped solidify his perspective on nature: "One would think that Mont Blanc was a living being" (1074)), several imperialistic European countries (including England) ransacked Hawaii, exploiting the island in the name of science and economy thereby turning nature into a specimen and a commodity:

While Keats wrote they were cutting down the sandalwood forests
while he listened to the nightingale they heard their own axes
 echoing through the forests
while he sat in the walled garden on the hill outside the city they
 thought of their gardens dying far away on the mountain
while the sound of the words clawed at him they thought of their wives
while the tip of his pen travelled the iron they had coveted was
 hateful to them
while he thought of the Grecian woods they bled under red flowers
while he dreamed of wine the trees were falling from the trees
while he felt his heart they were hungry and their faith was sick
while the song broke over him they were in a secret place and they
 were cutting it forever
while he coughed they carried the trunks to the hole in the forest
 the size of a foreign ship
while he groaned on the voyage to Italy they fell on the trails and
 were broken
when he lay with the odes behind him the wood was sold for cannons
when he lay watching the window they came home and lay down
and an age arrived when everything was explained in another language (Merwin 66)

The poem suggests that Keats' (and perhaps Shelley's) language no longer adequately explained nature, for a language of commerce insidiously replaced the language of Nature. Likewise, the names for the trees, plants, and animals of Hawaii used by the Polynesian settlers were replaced with European common and Latin scientific names.

It is this dissonant chord that interests me, and there are no easy answers. Cook's travels led to exploitation; but Shelley's travels led to a deep reverence for nature. The passion with which Shelley traveled is perhaps no different than that of Cook and other explorers who paved the way for exploitation--a passion captured in Shelley's "Alastor":

The day was fair and sunny, sea and sky
Drank its inspiring radiance, and the wind
Swept strongly from the shore, blackening the waves.
Following his eager soul, the wanderer
Leaped in the boat, he spread his cloak aloft
On the bare mast and took his lonely seat,
And felt the boat speed o'er the tranquil sea
Like a torn cloud before the hurricane. (1061)

This romantic eagerness is the seed for both exploitation and gentleness. Shelley's travel is in the context of a deep reverence for nature, for "Alastor..." begins with an invocation of Shelley's muse, the muse who is the "Earth, ocean, air" (1054). To be inspired by this muse, Shelley recognizes that his actions must be intentional and must be in harmony with nature: "If no bright bird, insect, or gentle beast / I consciously have injured" (1054). The footnote reminds us that Shelley was a vegetarian (go veg-heads!!). How did Shelley reconcile these conflicts? Did he try? Was his vegetarianism an act of protest against a nation that increasingly saw nature as a commodity?--or was his vegetarianism simply for health reasons? If Mont Blanc is a being, how could Shelley remain silent with the exploitation of other locales that profess a similar Power? Did he respond to the sense of entitlement that allowed England to bring back countless specimens (rather than creatures or beings) from around the globe? Did Shelley see this contradiction?--or did the robust *Spirit of the Age* of travel, exploration, science, wonder, curiosity, and awe overwhelm any sort of skepticism, critique, or down right political activism?

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David Tagnani
Dr. Debbie Lee
English 521
2 September 2010

Byron's "My Soul is Dark"

I remember perusing the table of contents of my new Byron book and spotting this title. Sounded intriguing, and I was happy to discover that the poem was about my other favorite art form: music. It was not until I browsed some scholarship for this annotation that I learned of the context of this poem.

Part of Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*, this poem is the dramatization of an episode of in 1 Samuel. In brief, Saul is melancholy—tormented by an "evil spirit from the Lord" (16:14). To raise his spirits, a servant is sent for, one who is skilled at the lyre. This servant is David, who succeeds in riding Saul of the evil spirit tormenting him.

Byron's poem never mentions these actors by name, and so my younger self was left to interpret this poem as somewhat of a love poem to music. I also allocated to the poem a more universal scope, since I was unaware of the very specific event that inspired it. "My Soul is Dark" is a paean to the power of music. The speaker mourns the condition of his heart, which "hath been by sorrow nursed, / And ached in sleepless silence long" (13-4). The speaker is addressing a minstrel, imploring him to play a song so that "If in this heart a hope be dear, / That sound shall charm it out again" (6-7). We never do get to hear the minstrel's reply, or the speaker's reaction to the song, but we get an impassioned plea that testifies to the emotional power of music.

This power is not represented as the power to simply change mood, but rather as a cathartic power that will facilitate a purging of pain. Though the song may charm forth any remaining hope from the speaker's heart, it will also cause tears to flow so that they will not "burn my brain" (8). Echoing that desire for tears from the first stanza, the second stanza calls for music that is "wild and deep," specifically asking the minstrel to defer any happy strains until after he has allowed for such catharsis to take place: "I must weep, / Or else this heavy heart will burst" (11-12). The last couplet makes clear that music is his only hope, the only thing that has the power to save him from a broken heart.

This is my take, anyway, devoid of context. So it was to my dismay that I found out that "My Soul is Dark" is based on an episode from a Jewish holy text. No problem, I thought: certainly Byron realized the universality of the ideas he was versifying. But then I read on, deeper into Thomas L. Ashton's interpretation of the poem.

The emphasis falls heavily on the heart, for it is ultimately the heart that must restore the fallen universe which the brain forges. When the heart is wrought to sympathy, self-consciousness is vitiated. The success of the catharsis depends on Promethean selflessness attested to by genuine weeping. Music is not so much cause as effect: Harmony is a symbol of the mediation suggested by "melting."
(673)

I'll confess I don't understand most of this, and what I do understand, I disagree with. Music is not cause, but effect? That is obviously the *exact opposite* of my reading, which of course I believe to be the correct one. Anyway, what I wanted to reflect on is how sometimes scholarship kills poetry. It is not even so much that Ashton's conclusion is at odds with mine; it is that his tortuous, discursive route to that conclusion is at odds with the simple emotional appeal of the poem, a simple two-stanza ode to the power of music.

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Stephanie Lyells

9/2/10

Annotation of Wordsworth's "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman"

In "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman", Wordsworth attempts to describe the lonely fate of a Northern Indian woman as she is forsaken to the woods by her remaining party while traveling. In doing so, Wordsworth is attempting to embody the persona of a personage and an experience from which he is very much distanced—from the gender role he attempts to identify with as well as the geographical and cultural details to which he alludes. In attempting such a narrative, Wordsworth creates a Northern Indian woman that Europeans empathize with, thus drawing the peripheral and marginalized into a centralized comprehension. This rhetorical effect seems dependent upon various methods of translation that are incorporated into the poem, all of which work to translate a travel narrative's description of an account into a tale of quasi-mythic status.

One way in which this is done is in rendering the Native American woman as a fallen, tragic hero who is relatable to European values and morals. The woman, in falling behind, gives away her child to another. The woman's maternal instinct is a strong undercurrent in her lament at death, and she proclaims, "My poor forsaken child, if I/For once could have thee close to me,/With happy heard I then would die" (lines 65-68). Although I do not claim that a Native American woman would not have maternal instincts or be devastated by the loss of a child, I do claim that in employing maternal feelings as a central theme to the poem that Wordsworth is seeking to relay universal values that Europeans can commend and sympathize with. The woman can thus be seen as a noble savage who is governed by natural laws and values, and she is fashioned similarly to J.F. Cooper's Uncas in that both characters represent the uncivilized yet genteel—and in this case, the domestic. Wordsworth even portrays the woman as literate, giving an inter-textual reference that alludes to Samson Agoniste's lines with the words "My journey will be shortly run" (line 61). Here, Wordsworth's audience would recollect the allusion and understand its meaning and thus once again feel relatable to the casted Native American woman because her mythologized knowledge is comparable to that of European society.

Similarly, Wordsworth creates a Native American woman curiously uneducated in survival and the wilderness—much more commensurate to Hearne than to a woman who has grown up in the area. Perhaps this is a rather trivial point to notice, but sense of place and ecology seems like a rather essential part of assuming a persona of difference. However, the forsaken Indian Woman seems to be rather hapless in her inability to prepare a fire, search for shelter, or survive in wilderness conditions. Although it is a story about a woman left due to sickness because "despair o' ver [her] prevailed", Wordsworth writes: "For strong and without pain I lay,/ My friends, when you were gone away" (lines 23, 30). While Wordsworth does not include details of her sickness, recovery, and decision to stay behind, his description of the abandoned woman follows European values and standards in that the woman is hapless and helpless uprooted from her domestic space and abandoned in the wild. Subtly, this poem seems to criticize the values of a culture that would leave behind a woman or man to perish alone. In assuming a position and voice of an intra-cultural criticism rather than an inter-cultural criticism, Wordsworth affects an act of ventriloquism that appears more appropriate and accurate because it is seemingly the voice of someone within the culture.

Susan L. Duba
ENGL 521 Romanticism
2 September 2010

Sickening Love:
Death Imagery in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"

John Keats uses images of death and sickness in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" to depict the feeling of a lost or unrequited love. The first image of the knight "palely loitering" (Keats 2) hints that he is experiencing a sort of sickness, though at this point it is unclear as to the cause. The knight's "haggard" and "woe-begone" (6) demeanor is further heightened with the images of death such as the "lily" (9), "fever dew" (10), and "fading rose" (11) on the knight's face, further alluding to his failing health. The presence of a flower commonly given at funerals, fever-induced sweat, and a bleak complexion give the reader the impression that he is at death's door. However, when the knight reveals what is ailing him, we learn that death is not the culprit of his foul appearance. He regales the anonymous speaker, and the reader, with the tale of his encounter with "a fairy's child" that he showered with gifts of a "garland.../bracelets...and fragrant zone" (17-18) to woo her. But his lament is given cause when we learn that just as she revealed her love for him, "she wept" (30) and left him lying alone "On the cold hill's side" (36). Her sudden arrival and departure and the appearance of "pale kings and princes" (37) reveal how strongly he is affected. He sees a woman, who could be imaginary or a vision, and then she is gone, leaving him alone and weary.

This unrequited love is presented with more images of death after his brief encounter with the fairy woman, but also stands as a warning about the guiles of women. The men that appear to the knight are as pale as he, suggesting they are in similar circumstances, or that they had been at one time. The strength of their sorrow is seen in the "horrid warning" (42) offered by the ghostly figures, which serves as a broader warning to the reader that compares the feeling of unrequited love with that of a slow death. This combination of "love and death-like suffering" (Wu 1339) that pervades this poem uses the dying aspects of nature to enhance the sorrow. The "sedge" that has already "withered" (Keats 3) is compared with the color on his face that "Fast witherth too" (12). His sorrow and death-like appearance is only given life when she is present and professing her love "in language strange" (27). Though he does not speak the language, he is sure that she is telling him she loves him, and his pain is lessened enough for him to be "lulled...asleep" (33). Of course, as soon as she is gone, he meets with the "death-pale" (38) men to express their horror of him being "in thrall" (40) to the fairy.

The extended metaphor of death in relation to unrequited love bleeds through this poem so that the reader feels as cold and sorrowful as the dying knight. This is at the heart of the interpreted intention: to express the effect of love and how one might react when those feelings are not returned.

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