

## Apocalyptic Imagery in Byron's "Darkness"

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“A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself.” Franklin D. Roosevelt

“The poetry of the earth is never dead.” John Keats

### Abstract

Lord Byron's much-neglected apocalyptic poem "Darkness" appears to predict the devolution of humankind and the end of the natural world. Reading "Darkness," which was written in tandem with Canto III of his romance verse *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, one cannot help but express concern about Byron's state of mind. Was he, in a state of despondency and resentment, envisioning a world on the verge of ending? Or was he a visionary poet imagining how nature would avenge callous, uncaring man who continues to vandalize the world's resources without mercy? In such a peculiar, somewhat science fictional poem, Byron's ideal vision of the past appears to fuse with the present and future to reflect reality in the ostensibly "incredible." In other words, Byron's dream poem turns out to be apocalyptic. As a matter of fact, dreams and prophecies are two major tenets of a Romantic mind. This paper will provide an ecocritical reading of "Darkness" and will consider what impelled Byron to write such an anonymous poem and uncover his prophetic vision and its implications for humanity's future and the natural world.

**Keywords:** "Darkness," science fictional poem, Lord Byron, devolution of humankind, apocalyptic visions, implications for humanity and nature.

### Introduction

Numerous poets, philosophers, novelists, painters, playwrights, and filmmakers have speculated—brooded in Byron's case—about the world's end. Several film productions have concerned themselves with an apocalyptic theme, such as *The Day the World Ended* (1955), *The Last Woman on Earth* (1960), *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), *Doomsday* (2008), *Doomsday Prophecy* (2011), and *The End of the World* (2013). The doomsday theme has attracted many artists and literary figures: "The Last Man" poems by Thomas Hood, T. J. Ouseley, Edward Wallace, and Eleanor Wilner; "The Last Man" a painting by John Martin; "The Last Man" a tale by Blackwood; and *The Last Man*, a play by George Dandin Pitt.

A Romantic theme pertaining to "the last man" was first initiated by an obscure French writer called Jean Francois Xavier Cousin de Grainville in his novel—written in 1805—entitled *Le Dernier Homme*. Apparently, both Mary Shelley and Lord Byron were familiar with it or had read a translated version of Grainville's work. In 1823, Thomas Campbell composed a poem entitled "The Last Man," a work inspired by Byron's "Darkness." However, Campbell claimed

that that he himself drew Byron's attention to the notion of the world's end and the extinction of nature and its species (Paley, 1999, pp. 196-197). Even though Byron might not be the forerunner of this apocalyptic theme, he is a precursor in his prophetic imaginings—seemingly addressing a contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. A literary critic stated in *The Monthly Magazine* (1818), "Whatever Lord Byron touches starts at once from the canvas, and we behold visions like realities before us" (p. 434). I entirely agree. Whoever reads "Darkness" has an inkling of exceptional sanity in the ingenious poem that Byron composed in July-August of 1816.

The summer of 1816 was a time of remarkable creativity and emotional turmoil in the lives of the inhabitants of the luxurious Villa Diodati, by Lake Geneva in Switzerland. The 28-year-old Byron, the most famous man in Britain, had fled from notoriety, celebrity, and debt, only to be joined in Geneva by Percy Bysshe Shelley and his lover Mary Wolstencraft and by her adventurous stepsister Claire Clairmont. Together with Byron's doctor, John Polidori, this unlikely group of bohemians shared their lives in an atmosphere infused with sexual mores and artistic tensions, from which would emerge some of the most famous creations of the Romantic period: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, Polidori's *The Vampyre*, and Byron's "Darkness." "Darkness" engenders the illusion that paradise has eternally vanished, a theme that bears an echoing semblance to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland."

### **Byron's Motives behind Writing "Darkness"**

Karl Kroeber (1960) in *Romantic Narrative Art* believes that Byron's "Darkness" "... does not give us the setting and situation in which the dream occurs, [and] does not provide us with the present reality against which the direful prophecy is launched" (p. 55). I disagree. Byron was exceedingly wide-ranging in his dream; no specific time was indicated, consciously wishing it to be applicable to all times. However, a reader senses that it is the beginning-of-the-end—as far as doomsday was concerned—concerning Byron's somber, contemporary prophecy. The poem's setting is based on the Swiss landscape he was delighting in, and it is possible that Shelley had prodded Byron's attention to the daunting theme of pitched darkness. During the summer of 1816, while Shelley and Byron were vacationing and observing nature, specifically the Alps, Shelley had stated, "What a thing it would be, if all were involved in darkness at this moment, the sun and stars to go out. How terrible the idea!" (qtd. in Vail, 1997, p. 189).

Poetry mirrors events occurring in cultures while simultaneously reflecting the poet's state of mind. At the time, Byron's circumstances were not at all promising. He wrote "Darkness" while in a state of hapless dejection. In January 1816, Byron had fallen out with his wife who no longer tolerated his whimsical, bleak attitude; she broke up with him, taking her infant daughter to live at her parents'. Two months after their separation, Byron left England. Moreover, Byron was in debt and tarnished for having a relationship with his half sister, Augusta. All these factors contributed to his mental and emotional imbalance, resulting in desperate, suicidal imaginings during his Switzerland vacation. In a letter to Thomas Moore dated January 28, 1817, Byron confesses: "I was half mad during the time of its [Childe Harold, Canto III] composition, between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love inextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies" (qtd. in Cochran, 2012, p. 35).

Byron's external world situation was as depressing as the poet's internal meditations. In 1814, a 64-year-old female called Joanna Southcott proclaimed that she would give birth to Shiloh, "God's son," who would recreate the world after demolishing it. The entire media's attention was focused on this phenomenon. A similar rumor known as the Bologna prophecy occurred two years later on July 18, 1816; an Italian astronomer forecast the sun's extinguishment—signaling the end of times—and this planted fear among European and English people (Vail, 1997, pp. 183-184, 189).

During the summer of the same year, Byron proposed to his literary friends that they jointly write a gothic, horror story while awaiting the never-ending deluge and freezing temperatures to end. Meanwhile, there was total darkness throughout the day. These unnatural disturbances were due to Indonesia's Tambora volcano eruption in April 1815. The loud blast was heard at a distance of 2600 km. For two days, total darkness engulfed far-flung, distant places, and the temperature dropped significantly. One witness stated, "The darkness was so profound throughout the remainder of the day, that I never saw anything equal to it in the darkest night; it was impossible to see your hand when held up close to the eye" (qtd. in Oppenheimer, 2003, p. 239). During the eruption, a huge amount of volcanic ash was transmitted into the upper atmosphere, darkening the sun to the extent that people witnessed sunspots concealing parts of the sun. Several lunar eclipses occurred. The one that appeared on June 9, 1816 was seen in America and Britain, the darkest in recorded history. The moon had outwardly disappeared from the clear sky. This darkest eclipse is a telltale that the Tambora eruption was the greatest in history (Strothers, 2005, pp. 1445-1450). The Tambora eruption led to the emergence of tsunamis and earthquakes. The earth literally froze to the extent that various harvests were destroyed by frost. People suffered from famine, and since water was contaminated due to the poisonous ash, contagious diseases spread, killing even more people. Overall, the eruption killed according to Zolinger's statistics around 71,000 people (Oppenheimer, 2003, pp. 244-249). 1816 became known as the "Year without a Summer" and also nicknamed "Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death."

It was extraordinarily cold and wet that summer in Switzerland. Out of 183 days, there were 130 days of rain (Bate, 1996, pp. 433-440). As of June 10, 1816, the weather started changing. Streams and rivers flooded. Diseased animals lay dead on river surfaces; snowcapped mountains were witnessed, an exceptionally strange sight in summer. This severe weather continued in winter (Clubbe, 1991, pp. 26-40). People considered that the end of the world was looming; Byron was no exception.

In response to how he created such a pessimistic and dramatic poem about the end of the universe, Byron said he wrote it in "... Geneva, when there was a celebrated dark day, on which the fowls went to roost at noon, and the candles were lighted as at midnight" (qtd. in Lovell, 1954, p. 229). During the same year in June 27, 1816, Byron complained to John Murray, Byron's publisher, and grumbled about the "stress of weather" (qtd. in Cochran, 2012, p. 2). Byron wrote on July 29 to Samuel Rogers: "We have had lately such stupid mists-fogs-rains- and perpetual density- that one would think Castlereagh had the foreign affairs of the kingdom of Heaven also- upon his hands" (qtd. in Bate, 1996, p. 433). Undoubtedly, Byron's mood was highly affected by the weather. Such grim climatic conditions, the Bologna prophecy, and Byron's personal and financial problems contributed to the gloomy picture of the dark eclipse, the lens through which he perceived the planet.

### **"Darkness" within the Context of Romanticism**

Northrop Frye (1982) notes in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* that the Greek term apocalypse stands "for revelation" and it "... has the metaphorical sense of uncovering or taking a lid off" (p. 135). This term is directly related to mirroring stark reality, and it pessimistically reflects the end of the world. In fact, most of the English Romantic poets have an apocalyptic intuitiveness and are known for having a fresh perception of their surroundings. They turn what is natural into what is supernatural and vice versa. They even uncover natural elements in what is illusionary. In other words, they stretch the supernatural or magical world to that of reality.

Positive Romanticism does not apply to most of Byron's works. More specifically, "Darkness" falls under the umbrella of negative or dark Romanticism, a term coined by acclaimed author Morse Peckham. Through this term, Peckham refers to an imperfect man who is portrayed as lost, guilty, depressed, introvert, abandoned by God and other men. To Peckham (1996), "The typical symbols of Negative Romanticism are individuals who are filled with guilt, despair, and cosmic and social alienation [...] they are often outcasts from men and God, and they are almost always wanderers over the surface of the earth" (p. 18). Representatives of negative Romanticism are Coleridge, Mary Shelley, John Polidori as also are those characters like Shelley's "Alastor" and Byron's Childe Harold, Cain, and Manfred. In addition, the two remaining characters mentioned by Byron in "Darkness" are responsible for the imperfection of nature and the ills inflicted upon it; thus, they too enter the negative Romantic phase.

"Darkness" is a typical example of Edmund Burke's psychological theory of the sublime. Burke (2005) visualizes horror as the basic tenant of what is sublime because he believes that terror is a very strong emotion that strongly affects the human mind and makes visualized images seen as grand objects or concepts because they elicit awe or wonder (pp. 71, 82, 92). The terrifying visions of apocalyptic violence in "Darkness" are the origin of Burkean sublime because they elicit (as it will be seen later in this paper) a sense of peril. Readers stand in astonishment in front of all the terrifying images envisioned by Byron who echoes the dark Romantic style in the poem due to his focus on recurrent dark, terrifying, tragic future visions, which are becoming more tangible nowadays.

Death and rebirth is a recurrent theme in Romantic poetry. Under this theme falls Keat's "To Autumn," "Ode to a Grecian Urn," and "Ode to a Nightingale;" Blake's "The Tyger" and "The Sick Rose;" Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner;" Wordsworth's "The Prelude;" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." In these poems death promises a new beginning, a new life, resurrection, coming of dawn, and light; however, Byron in "Darkness" offers a divergent outlet for his Romantic creativity by outlining man's irtraceable dramatic fall. The Romantic vision of apocalypse in which the world is created, destroyed, and recreated by restoring order is absent in the poem because Byron predicts that man shamelessly conjures mental and physical death into the world: the death of nature and man concurrently. This is totally opposite to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in which there is eternity, and man will be redeemed from his sins. The vision of finite nature which is unable to carry on the cycle of life in the poem is what makes Byron's imagination extremely creative, and his prediction of man's destruction of both nature and man for the sake of mere destruction, not for mere regeneration, is what makes Byron different from other Romantics.

Byron's "Darkness" according to Paley (1999) "... presents apocalypse but no millennium" (p. 202). This poem offers no hope for a millennial beginning; the poem considers how warfare ceases at times when humanity encounters unearthly weather; man prioritizes his search for the means by which to provide heat, light, and food. Nature has become a wasteland, sterile, and lifeless with barren landscape. Natural resources are depleted, and man and nature face the possibility of extinction. Consequently, after the annihilation of humankind and all living things, darkness rules the whole planet. God created light out of darkness, void and chaos; thus, a new millennium was born. However, there is a reversal of *Genesis* in the poem. The poem starts with light imagery, and from light emerged eternal darkness, void, and confusion, a world of entire devolution. This is the notion of "transformative light" deployed by Mark Sandy (2016) in "Lines of Light: Poetic Variations in Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley" (p. 261). Jessica MacQueen (2015) compares the process of light transformation to a "slow domino effect of the sun's extinction on earthly life" resulting in "a damned vision of interconnectivity" (p. 4) between the poet or the speaker and the surrounding natural environment. Through blank verse,

which is an appropriate vehicle for portraying Byron's mysterious visions, Byron accelerates time and contemplates the end of the world showing how man sadly loses connectivity with his physical environment.

Romantic poets were known for their passion to endow imagination in their work. Romantic imagination is so powerful that it is endowed with a prophetic renovative power. To Shelley, imagination is so creative and powerful that it endows the poet with the power of revealing visions. Poems, to Shelley, are the outcome of genuine and original imagination. Similarly, to Keats "the power of creative imagination" is "a seeing, reconciling, combining force that seizes the old, penetrates beneath its surface, disengages the truth slumbering there, and, building a fresh, bodies forth a new a reconstructed universe in fair forms of artistic power and beauty" (qtd. in Wellek, 1949, p. 161). In other words, Romantic imagination in Keat's opinion can be so powerful and insightful because it can extricate truth even from what is old and can turn it aesthetically new.

Consequently, Romantic writers are self-professed prophets par excellence. William Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey," says, "... with an eye made quiet by the power/ Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,/ We see into the life of things" (ll. 46-48). For Wordsworth, creative imagination is having an insight and seeing through reality. In the 8<sup>th</sup> stanza of his Ode "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," Wordsworth poetically associates creative imagination with a "Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest." In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley (2004) believes that a poet is a prophet because he can predict the future through the lens of the present: "... his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time" (p. 37). In this respect, Byron also foresees global visions that cross the borders of time. It is true as Shelley says that poets are both legislators and prophets of the world because their poems keep surviving even after the occurrence of the visions they had predicted. Byron's imagination empowers him to delve into the present and come up with original and modern visions that transcend the frontiers of time.

Unlike Kroeber's beliefs, Byron reveals contemporary reality by being visionary, revealing apocalyptic truths through his poetic imagery. By doing so, he shows a powerful imagination, capable of visualizing apocalyptic incidents; he authentically describes them in a science fictional, dream-like poem that, in reality, is not a fantasy—it is a plausible depiction of a future reality. Unlike most of Byron's major works where apocalyptic visions are hinted at but are not the actual main theme of the work itself, the central idea in "Darkness" is a chain of daring and non-emphasized subjects that are currently familiar in our contemporary world.

### **Climatic Change**

Byron's poem alerts his readers to climate change at an early stage by depicting a dismal and chilling weather pattern with neither warmth nor light, in other words winter in mid-summer: "... the icy earth/ Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;/ Morn came and went- and came, and brought no day," (ll. 4-6). Byron even visualizes burnt down cities and includes this image deliberately because urban areas intensify his depiction of a collapsing environment. These burning cities with their factories and industrialized areas pose a great threat to nature, and the dark smoke emitted from these burning edifices results in devastating effects on weather and agriculture (Robock & Toon, 2012, p. 66). Byron (1930) imagines the sun's demise, leading to an "icy earth" and entire dimness. This same vision reoccurs in "The Prisoner of Chillon:" "First came the loss of light, and air,/ And then of darkness too:" (IX).

Although Switzerland's weather was appalling during that particular 1816 summer due to fog, mist, and uninterrupted rain, Byron's poem exaggerates the weather's effects by portraying it

as total darkness engulfing the world with temperatures dramatically dropping below zero. It seems Byron employed the 1816 weather calamity in order to predict, through the medium of poetry, the worst case scenario of global warming in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In 1785, Benjamin Franklin observed the interconnectedness between volcanic eruptions and climate change. When Iceland's Laki volcano erupted in 1783, Franklin noted that the sun weakened substantially. In spite of Franklin's discovery, science had not progressed sufficiently in 1816 to provide a satisfactory explanation for what was precisely occurring. However, in 1847 scientists did discover the cause of the sunless, wet summer (Rudolf, 1984, p. 14)—provoked by the thunderous explosion of the Indonesian Mt. Tambora that killed thousands of people.

Clare Brandabur believes that it is unlikely that Byron knew of the link between the mount Tambora eruption and the anomalous weather change that caused chilling coldness and pitch darkness during daytime. Like Brandabur, Bate (2001) in *Song of the Earth* mentions that Byron was unaware of the fact that the 1815 volcanic eruption was responsible for the rainy and gloomy weather in Switzerland. This is evident due to his use of a playful, ironic tone when referring to the fortunate people living near the volcano, suggesting that they are naturally endowed with heat and light (p. 97). I disagree. Thirty-one years before the volcano/climate link was scientifically proven, Byron did provide a vulcanological insinuation in "Darkness." Rudolf (1984) praises Byron's futuristic vision of climate change for the reasons lurking behind a sunless summer. In other words, Byron was able to provide an explanation to this geological conundrum before scientists (p. 14). The lines: "Happy were those who dwelt within the eye/ Of the volcanoes, and their mountain-torch" (ll. 16-17) reflect the same notion commonly reiterated today as in "when the bomb drops I want to be underneath it" or another expression "at ground zero" and also reveal Byron's intuition of an existing link between the volcanic eruption and the lost summer. Byron sarcastically envies those blessed and cursed people who temporarily dwell near the volcano that is their sole illuminative source; they are blessed by heat and light in an attempt to survive, while others resort to burning their possessions and habitats to resist the cold.

Even though the 200-year-old poem "Darkness" is categorized in a fictitious prism, it is a poem replete with realistic and contemporary images and occurrences more applicable today than two centuries ago. Byron proved to be prophetic by foreseeing that a volcanic eruption can be the cause of uncontrollable destruction resulting in the annihilation of nature and humanity. After three years of a volcanic flare-up, the toxic ash that is emitted from the volcano obscures the sun, resulting in the destruction of the most tenacious species of organic life on earth (Bate, 1996, p. 432). Survival is quasi impossible during such extreme weather conditions. Byron correctly deduced that extreme cold weather results in a change in human nature to the extent that men "forget their passions" (l. 7) and focus their minds on survival.

Volcano eruptions cause solar activity and dramatic changes in temperature. Additionally, trees wilt in winter (Gvelesiani, 2000, p. 4). Byron writes to Augusta on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1816: "Arrived at the Grindenwald... Passed whole woods of withered pines- all withered-trunks stripped & barkless- branches lifeless- done by a single winter..." (qtd. in Cochran, 2012, p. 15). The image of withered trees in the aftermath of changes in weather conditions is envisaged by Byron (1930) in the following lines: "... The world was void,/.../ Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless" (ll. 69-71). The very same image is reiterated in Byron's closet drama *Manfred*: "...these blasted pines,/ Wrecks of a single winter, barkless, branchless" (I ii).

Climate change affects the availability of water resources to the extent that the accessibility of water is expected to decline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Byron's verses hint at silent and stagnant seas and oceans: "The rivers, lakes, and ocean stood still,/ And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;/ Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,/ And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd/ They slept on the abyss without a surge-/ The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave," (ll. 73-78). Byron proves to be a purveyor of the apocalyptic image of water insufficiency.

At a relatively young age, Byron had a vision that the world was uncontrollably drifting in the path of chaos and extinction due to changes in temperature (global warming). It is vital to notice that climatic change is affecting our planet to an immense degree: rising temperature, depleted ozone layer, anomalous weather, epidemic diseases, increased death rates, decreased food supply, migration of animals and insects, melting glaciers, severe droughts, increased flooding; the list of disasters is ad infinitum. A paraphrased version of Byron's poem reveals various pessimistic imaginings (the extinguished sun, vanishing moon, dim stars, freezing earth, impenetrable darkness, starved animals and humans, and deactivated phenomena such as winds, tides, and waves) that are the outcome of climate change.

### **Heat Death**

A British mathematical physicist and engineer, Lord William Thomson Kelvin, introduced the theory of heat death in 1852. The planet would enter the Dark Age soon because the atoms found on earth will heat and freeze until they reach a state of harmony called "thermal equilibrium at Absolute Zero" that results in "the Big Freeze" or "the Death Heat" when the world will be  $10^{1000}$ ; this would happen because "The remnants of our Sun will have cooled so much that its glow will have faded like the clinkers in a cold fireplace" (Hood, 2013, p. 2). In other words, all the sources of light and warmth will be entirely consumed while making cooler objects warm until a state of temperature equilibrium occurs in which no more heat is generated, so the universe will experience a stage of eternal, murky darkness, and coldness. Heat, taking the form of energy, would be wasted and dispersed in a chaotic manner until all hot and cold objects have the same temperature. This death heat phenomenon is unavoidable—renewable energy would no longer exist to be used by man.

Examining Byron's poem, readers realize that all hot objects are totally consumed, and a state of zero temperature "icy earth" renders the planet "rayless" and "pathless" (l. 4). The image of a fading sun recently predicted by scientists was announced by Byron at the beginning of "Darkness" in 1816 in the form of an apocalyptic, realistic dream: "I had a dream, which was not all a dream./ The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars/ Did wander darkling in the eternal space," (ll. 1-3). Although Byron has to place himself "in a liminal space between waking and dreaming" he is able to "see through the darkness" (MacQueen, 2015, pp. 4, 8) and envisions such prophetic/apocalyptic cosmological event.

### **Famine**

In 1816, Europe, including Switzerland, experienced hunger demonstrations, yet Byron prefigured a wider image of international starvation. Byron blames humankind for the tragedy of famine. In the poem, only two enemies outlive hunger: "The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two/ Of an enormous city did survive,/And they were enemies..." (ll. 55-57). What is also interesting about these facts is that Byron perceives man as a biological being who uses up resources and affects the reproduction rate.

Twenty-nine years after Byron wrote "Darkness," Ireland suffered between 1845 and 1852 from mass starvation bearing several names: "The Great Famine" (in Irish "an Gorta

Mór”), “The Great Hunger,” “Black ’47,” and “The Great Starvation.” More specifically, famine ensued due to the potato blight disease caused by a very small insect, a pathogen that came to Europe from North America and spread itself widely.

This potato blight began during 1845, re-attacked the crops again in 1846 reaching its peak in 1847. At that time, both Belgium and Scotland were experiencing starvation, but nothing is comparable to the Irish famine. This agricultural crisis led to severe consequences—Ireland lost one third of its inhabitants. Around one million passed away due to famine, and two million left to America in “coffin ships.” A large number of passengers died of hunger or disease before reaching their destination.

During the great famine in Ireland, people died in the fields, on the streets, and in their huts. People were buried without coffins, providing the chance for hungry rats, cats, and dogs to feed on the “uncoffined dead,” (Shannon, 2009, paras. 11, 16) the very same image that Byron foresaw before it happened: “... and the pang/ Of famine fed upon all entrails- men/ Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;” (ll. 43-45). When faced with the scarcity of food, and after consuming all natural resources and eating even poisonous animals, humans are helpless and end up feeding on themselves: “The meagre by the meagre were devour’d,” (l. 46). In these lines, Byron predicts that a large-scale famine will occur during which the weak will eat the weakest; humans, after consuming all natural resources, will resort to cannibalism.

Byron (1930) hints in the poem that political war or war for territory is meaningless when famine takes over because what matters is a war for natural resources and food: “And War, which for a moment was no more” (l. 38). I concur with Brandabur (2011) that wars taking place in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan are not political wars to extend territories and promote democracy but a resource war, an indirect war to gain “energy sources” and conquer the shriveling amount of non-renewable “fossil fuel” (p. 9). When the last two existing men meet face to face, they encounter their destiny and die after looking at each other’s faces: “saw, and shriek’d, and died” (l. 66). The personified notion of famine has written “Fiend” on their brows: “Even of their mutual hideousness they died,/ Unknowing who he was upon whose brow/ Famine had written Fiend...” (ll. 67-69). These last two men die from fear. Ironically, the survivor’s search for food finally leads to their total extermination. Famine is the major cause for the extinction of both animals and humans.

### **Environmental Apocalypse (Vision of Extinction, Scarcity of Natural Resources, and Disruption of the Natural Order)**

Byron possesses an intuitive insight that should be highly praised. He had a remarkable revelation concerning the relationship between man—and not only human nature—but also Mother Nature. In this respect, his poem seemingly expresses more than what it suggests; he is the poet of tomorrow, as he depicts the relationship between man and his surroundings and predicts an ecocatastrophe, depletion of the natural resources in the hands of man. Eva Horn (2014) (calls this a “worst-case scenario” in which man does not succeed in taking this sociological “stress test” (p. 65); thus, through this devastating experience, humanity fails in preserving itself and nature simultaneously.

Reading the poem, one confronts Byron’s vast knowledge of nearing disasters. Nearly 200 years ago, Byron hinted at the vision of the interconnectedness between man and his natural surroundings and the disastrous aftermath of any disharmony in this bondage. According to J. L. Schatz (2012), “Every molecule of the Earth’s ecology is interconnected. When one part dies we all stand on the brink of extinction” (p. 28). Paul Watson, an environmental activist and the founder of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society in 1977, remarks that when marine animals



undergo extinction, entire bodies of water perish and man dies away accordingly (qtd. in Schatz, 2012, p. 22). This apocalyptic vision of the death of animals and its aftermath—the disappearance of water, an essential natural resource—is embodied in the following lines in the poem: “A lump of death- a chaos of hard clay./ The rivers, lakes, and ocean stood still,/ And nothing stirr’d within their silent depths;/ Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,/ And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp’d/ They slept on the abyss without a surge” (ll. 72-77). The letter “s” sound is generously deployed by Byron at the beginning or the end of the word of the above lines to accentuate the glumness that takes hold of the entire universe.

This future image of a mute ocean reflects the silent humans who stand powerless in front of the powerful, disrupted nature. Byron is not fabricating his images; he is persuasively endowed with a prophetic talent for picturing futuristic catastrophes and their consequences. Byron hints at the scarcity of water through the terrifying apocalyptic image of the silent waters. Fully aware of the maddening fact that living beings are limited in number and becoming scarce, Byron writes: “... the fertility of the plains are wonderful, & specie is scarce...” (qtd. in Hubbell, 2010, p. 187). Byron should be praised for his ecological awareness that nature, man’s eternal companion, is worth preserving. Nature must remain intact and shielded since it is a sacred home for species that ensures the continuity of the human race.

Similar to other Romantic poets who are concerned with the welfare of humanity, Byron proves to be an eco-poet par excellence. He is wholly convinced that humans are depleting the land of its resources and therefore launches his poem as a medium for his futuristic plan to rescue the ecosystem. His message is abundantly lucid: the earth’s natural resources are finite. In Byron’s poem, we witness nature’s demise and darkness enveloping the entire world. In the aftermath of the sun’s extinction, humans destroy everything and consume the entirety of combustible resources to generate light and heat: “And they did live by watchfires - and the thrones,/ The palaces of crowned kings- the huts,/ The habitations of all things which dwell,/ Were burnt for beacons; cities were consumed” (ll. 10-13), but in vain because the fire is ephemeral: “... the crackling trunks/ Extinguish’d with a crash...” (ll. 20-21). A reader notices in the following lines how terrified man is in the process of providing fuel for the fire: “The brows of men by the despairing light/ Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits/ The flashes fell upon them; some lay down/ And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest/ Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smiled;/ And others hurried to and fro, and fed/ Their funeral piles with fuel, and look’d up/ With mad disquietude on the dull sky” (ll. 22-29). This ephemeral fire, instead of having an invisible mysterious power of illumination and inspiration, ironically accentuates the miserable reality of man’s black heart; unfortunately, it is man himself who destroys nature, not for the purpose of regeneration and renewal, but for the sake of sheer destruction.

The struggling humans, whether rich or poor, are paralyzed in front of this natural disaster and at the same time are running out of time, as they attempt to consume the maximum amount of heat from irreplaceable natural resources to sustain their existence: “Forests were set on fire” (l. 19); however, “... hour by hour/ They fell and faded...” (ll. 19-20) until “The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath/ Blew for a little life, and made a flame” (ll. 62-63). In order to overcome the severe cold weather and absolute darkness, man is readying his own funeral. As nature is consumed, so is man; this fire is becoming “funeral piles” since man is killing all forms of nature. The process of extinction advances swiftly, abandoning any expectation of changing man’s destiny, and ultimately the entire planet plunges into inevitable darkness.

Byron concluded that the living environment links all phases of existence; nature, for Byron, has an exacting power that controls all living beings; it plays a vital role in the ecosystem.

For this reason, Byron (1930) advises man to "... love Earth only for its earthly sake" (*CHP*, III, LXXI). From its very start, the poem sounds the knoll of nature's death when announcing the extinguishing of the sun. This is the inception of disequilibrium in the natural order. Consequently, man struggles mightily for his survival: searching for warmth, light, and food and ultimately reduced to cannibalism, thus breaking the social order and adding to the disharmony in human nature. I agree with Jonathan Bate (1996) that Byron's message throughout the poem is "... when ecosystems collapse, human bonds do so too" (p. 447). Man has lost control of the ecosystem; he is subsequently unable to handle his surrounding environment.

This is a conspicuous sign that the natural order is once again violated. Byron is accusing man for his inadvertent behavior towards the ecosystem. The scarcity of natural resources leads to chaos: birds are incapable of flying "... the wild birds shriek'd/ And, terrified, did flutter on the ground" (ll. 32-33); beasts become domestic "... the wildest brutes/ Came tame and tremulous..." (ll. 34-35); and poisonous snakes do not bite and live with people "... and vipers crawl'd/ And twined themselves among the multitude" (ll. 35-36). Chaos and darkness affect "the differentiations between species" to the extent that "species boundaries blur" (MacQueen, 2015, p. 5) and so does social differentiation/demarcation. Complete chaos and disorder continue in the poem: "cities were consumed" (l. 13) as they are being burnt as a wrong source of light and heat; this image shows that there is disharmony in the natural order too. The entire destruction is not the result of God's anger but the result of collective inhumane vandalism vis-à-vis the planet. Byron intentionally mentions that cities are burnt down because urban life symbolizes technological development, industrialism, and the modernism that threaten rural life. By setting cities ablaze, man is intentionally distorting the universe and destroying civilizations, the mark of man's continuity and privilege. The rivals of nature, urban areas representing human achievements and technology, have advanced on the account of nature. Byron envisages an industrialized world ruled by technology that endangers the natural landscape causing ecocide, an extensive disruption in the ecosystem.

Nature is whimsical; when abused, it strikes back and turns into an unconquerable power. Byron warns humans of nature's ferocity enabling it to dismantle civilizations, destroy man's world, and cause mass hysteria. Nature gave birth to cities; now cities have to vanish in order to restore the natural equilibrium. Byron believes that nature should be unspoiled by artificial human progress and appreciates the wild as a pristine primitive place more than civilized life. That is why he confesses: "I love not Man the less, but Nature more" (*CHP*, IV, CLXXVIII).

In the poem, Byron blames man for breaching the natural order that, in turn, leads to an environmental crisis. The universe is engulfed in impenetrable shade and gloom because of man. The poet speaks publically (using the plural form) in the poem; he speaks in a collective rather than an individual sense; he accuses all humans for their massive destruction: "And men forgot their passions," "brows of men," "their clenched hands," "their funeral piles," "with their skeleton hands," and the list goes on. Byron (1930) bluntly asserts in Canto IV in *Childe Harold* that man is inflicting damage on nature: "Man marks the earth with ruins.../.../ The wrecks are all thy deed..." he adds that when man harms nature, he will die unheroically: "... like a drop of rain/ He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,/ Without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd, and unknown" (CLXXIX) and will be absorbed in misery, for he is being kicked out of paradise: "And thus they plod in sluggish misery,/ Rotting from sire to son, and age to age/.../ Bleed gladiator-like, and still engage/ Within the same arena where they see/ Their fellows fall before, like leaves of the same tree" (XCIV). The same image is repeated in "Darkness:" where men deprived of love die unheroically, as if they are animals "... and each sate sullenly apart,/"

Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;/ All earth was but one thought- and that was death,/ Immediate and inglorious” (ll. 40-43).

### Man's Devolution

Ernest Lovell (1966) defines the “Zeluco theme” as “The tradition... that a villain or any other character with feelings of guilt, misanthropy, or excessive gloom can derive neither pleasure nor spiritual comfort from a contemplation of nature” (p. 139). This is true of the poem in which Byron reveals that humans who have sinned against nature and who displayed enmity towards their brothers in humanity are unable to discern joy in a benevolent maternal Nature that has turned against them. Nature prevents them from enjoying its benevolence. Man is not capable of co-existing with nature and humanity at large; he has become an unprotected, vulnerable outcast. A human being in this sense is no longer a child of God but simply a biological human being.

Pictured as merely living creatures, humans are deprived of their religious lineage—abandoned by a merciful God, Whose presence is omitted in the poem. In “Darkness,” the “last man” theme is evident in the remaining last two men inhabiting the earth. Man, in the poem, reflects the destiny of a dark Romantic hero because he descends from Eden to hell, but instead of being redeemed and converting to a retraceable journey back to the primary phase of innocence, he forever stays in hell. Hence, man is portrayed as weak and prone to sin which leads to his destruction, denying the possibility of redemption. Since man is being deprived of God's divine image, there is no hint or mention of an afterlife in the poem: men cursed, screamed, wept, and “gnash'd their teeth” (l. 32). This is an allusion to the Bible: Those abandoned by God are tossed “... into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8: 11-2). This is similar to the apocalyptic image present in the poem. This same uncanny image is repeated in *Manfred*: “... I [Manfred] have gnash'd/ My teeth in darkness till returning morn” (II ii).

Man no longer dominates the natural world. The tables are turned; nature takes the lead by swiftly overpowering humans and acquiring unfaceable brutality, leading to an eternal void and blackness that is personified in the image of a female no one can possess but is indubitably ready to possess: “... She was the Universe” (l. 82). The abstract “dominating destructive personification female” is altered by Byron into “a mythical being” (Paley, 1999, p. 199). The end of “Darkness” is repeated in *Manfred* in which the main character Manfred, a frustrated, depressed, and alienated character states: “The future, till the past be gulf'd in darkness” (I ii); it seems that this Byronic hero foresees his fate as well as that of humanity. Moreover, a similar notion of death, dimness, and eternal tranquility is conspicuous at the end of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: “Dark-heaving;- boundless, endless, and sublime-/ The image of eternity- the throne/ Of the Invisible...” (CLXXXIII).

The term “negative Romanticism” typically describes Byron as a Gothic Romantic. In gothic literature, writers reveal the macabre side of human nature. This is exactly what Byron does. Man is no longer man; he is a ferocious, barbaric being who ends up socializing with animals. He represents the sinister side of a negative Romantic character, portrayed as an outcast creature, who is physically and psychologically tortured, and therefore, only fit to socialize with animals. Confronted with a supernatural power, man, instead of envisioning repentance and salvation, competes frenetically with his fellow man, struggling for nourishment to survive: “... a meal was bought/ With blood...” (ll. 39-40). Instead of uniting as a team in the face of a natural disaster such as volcano eruptions, floods, utter blackness, fading sun, star and moon, man becomes selfish, incapable of love, compassion, and sympathy: “men forgot their passions in the dread/.../... no love was left” (ll. 7, 41). When subjugated by famine, man becomes self-seeking, unethical, deceitful, and belligerent.

In “Darkness,” Byron makes a metaphorical connotation between the extreme bad weather and its effect on human nature. The external bleak darkness that engulfs humanity and that is internally mirrored in man’s heart develops into a sinister being lacking love and compassion. Men are passive towards a global catastrophe: “... their selfish and hopeless burning of civilization and nature speeds the destruction of the world” (Mazurowski, 1977, p. 33). In the same fashion, nature is powerful in its wild storms, avalanches, volcanoes, fires, floods, and earthquakes, making man paralyzed in emergent natural disasters. Moreover, Byron reveals an amazingly harsh relationship among men themselves. Instead of uniting in the face of adversity, the last two survivors consider themselves fortunate since they provisionally survive the heat-death of the universe; they are ultimately killed by their apathy for their fellow living being. This is even a more horrible scene than Cain killing Abel. The last two men kill each other because they know they are doomed and cannot go back to paradise, so they turn out to be nihilistic, eventually destroying themselves.

In the poem, Byron traces the devolution of man who sinks/degenerates to the level of bestiality: “Byron shrinks man from a noble, defiant being to an insignificant member of a herd or pack of beasts” (Mazurowski, 1977, p.10) since he is referred to as “the crowd” (l. 55) and “the multitude” (l. 36). Hence, Byron situates man and animals at the same level; both have the same reaction towards extinction and the loss of light and heat. Due to frenzy, they both become irrational and mad, existing in a state of agitation, struggling over food. By neglecting nature and blindly following technology, man has lost his humaneness and sociability; he has deserted civilization’s womb, consequently returning to an earlier phase of life—adopting primitiveness, becoming a “Dawn man.” This is how Byron foreshadows the vanishing of civilizations and natural resources. Ultimately, nature neither redeems nor forgives man; man and nature go hand in hand to the abyss of darkness. What distinguishes Byron from most Romantics is how he understands that man’s destruction of nature will lead to total annihilation. In “Darkness,” Byron intentionally and willingly renounces the positive Romantic vision of eternity.

## **Conclusion**

In “The Dream,” Byron (1930) writes “...The mind can make/ Substances, and people planets of its own/ With beings brighter than have been, and give/ A breath to forms which can outlive all flesh” (ll. 19-22). The poet is aware of the extraordinary intellectual and visionary power of the intellect; consequently, his dream in “Darkness” became a reality, a reality that is familiar to our modern world. In his poetry, Byron always sought truth. His readers are appalled by the sullen, macabre, gothic ambiance, and by the aftermath of the poem’s dark insinuations of the end-of-the-world. In fact, Byron’s genius is revealed through his foresightedness since “[h]e reacted unerringly to faint intuitive signals perceptible to no-one else...” (Gvelesiani, 2000, p. 1). Through his pilgrimage into the future, Byron proves to have a unique talent for making fulfillable predictions. His creative Romantic imagination is so sharp and intuitive that he is able to fathom that man’s sins towards nature will lead to the world’s end and discontinuity: a typical dark Romantic theme. This makes him a contemporary poet par excellence. Goethe stated, “I could not... make any use of any man as the representative of the modern poetical era except him [Byron], who undoubtedly is... the greatest genius of our century” (qtd. in Berry, 1978, p. 376).

In his prophetic poem, Byron’s catastrophic visions are tightly knit to each other through a cause-effect sequence; similar to the domino effect, one disaster leads to another. His revelations concerning nature and humanity are greatly appreciated; attempts to lay the foundations for a perfect world—a world fit for posterity. Through his poem, he undertakes to

mend the abyss between the golden past and the unappealing future by warning of a global calamity in case the natural order was violated, thus alerting the world of the peril looming ahead if nature is disrespected and defiled. Having a profound affiliation with nature, Byron understood its crisis. He foresaw what the end would resemble if man insists on tampering with natural phenomena and resources. Byron makes it clear that nature is not a flawless machine; it is as finite and fragile as man is and can easily be unperfected by man. His message is straightforward: the natural world is in jeopardy, and action is essential before the world ends up in an eternal void and out-and-out darkness. As a Romantic poet, he had a prophetic imagination and was far ahead of his time in anticipating global visions that had taken place and will take place. His predictions are indicative of his full understanding of the constructive force of nature and natural disasters, as opposed to the destructive force of man, contributing to man-made disasters. He acts like an eco-friendly visionary who wants to safeguard the ecological heritage and becomes a prophet of nature, calling for an ethical preservation of the environment. Thus, he uses the poem as a medium to organize man's relationship with nature.

Byron is a believer in meliorism—a doctrine that the world may be improved by human effort. Thanks to visionary poets such as Byron, humanity should avert a catastrophic future by making better decisions that ensure ecological evolution. Preserving nature is much more crucial than advancing technology. Through his truthful insight into man's future embodied in comfortless visions of environmental apocalypse, Byron, the eco-poet, raises man's awareness by drawing him closer to nature (reunion with nature) and awakening his consciousness of environmental protection. He desires man to rethink his notions concerning the preservation of nature. Byron's significant distinction is that he addresses people in general, making them conscious that energy conservation is imperative, and protecting nature is every man's eco-friendly responsibility. All in all, he is asking man to be a redeemer in order to save nature from destruction. It is from this eco-critical lens that Byron's poem should be viewed. Ultimately, it is urgent for the world to be aware of Byron's prophetic implications and to heed his loud cry in "Darkness."

It would be interesting if further studies or research is carried out to consider whether the apocalyptic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by a nuclear bomb is one of Byron's predictions in darkness. Another idea of concern could be the question of Byron's sexism since he refers to darkness as an empowering female. That is, is he contemplating a future ruled by a feminized darkness/disaster?

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