

Lecture 13: Intro to Literature & the Environment, *Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley & Thoreau*

A) "The Chimney Sweeper" William Blake

1) "The Chimney Sweeper" is one of a growing number of anti-pastoral poems: While William Strode penned the first "Chimney-Sweeper's Song" in 1635, by the time Blake produced his own version (1789), anxiety over London's urbanization and the growth of technological modernity was widespread.

2) Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" works like Edward Burtynsky's photographs: Blake's poem unabashedly looks straight at an environmental issue, as well as the cultural fallout that came along with it, in this case the exploitation of child labor. In this sense, Blake's poem is a clear, and distinctly modern, predecessor to works like Burtynsky's photographs.

3) Like Burtynsky, Blake appeals to the source of the problem - us, the audience: "My father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep"

4) Blake wrote two chimney-sweeper poems; he illustrated both.

B) "Michael: A Pastoral Poem" William Wordsworth, c. 1800

- 1) As its subtitle suggests, Wordsworth's "Michael: [is] A Pastoral Poem." Firmly in the tradition of Virgil's Eclogue I, "Michael" tells the story of the loss a place, in this case a family farm. In the process, the poem both directs our attention to an endangered environment (hence it seeks to bring about an environmental consciousness in the reader), as well as names the reason for its loss.
- 2) Wordsworth unabashedly depicts a perfect locus amoenus in "Michael": Like Katherine Philips, Wordsworth's describes "a country life" that is free of any problems; however, it is seriously endangered from without.
- 3) While earlier pastoral imagined an urban danger, here we have a new threat: It is not merely that cities (and there are now quite a few of them) threaten pastoral life, capitalist modernity, founded on the value of wealth alone, is now reaching far into what is imagined as untouched countryside, as the family farm is no longer economically viable.

- 4) "Michael" is a loco-descriptive poem in the tradition of "Cooper's Hill": If from the public way you turn your steps
Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head Gill,
You will suppose that with an upright path Your
feet must struggle; in such bold ascent The
pastoral Mountains front you, face to face.
But, courage! for beside that boisterous Brook The
mountains have all open'd out themselves, And
made a hidden valley of their own.
No habitation there is seen; but such As
journey thither find themselves alone
With a few sheep, with rocks and stones.
("Michael," 1-11)

Wordsworth is encouraging us to walk right into the poem--and its environment.

C) "Mont Blanc" Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1816

- 1) Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe, became an icon of wilderness: The Romantic poets, such as Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley, increasingly fetishized places that were untouched and wild (our word "wilderness" originally meant "wild-ness"). Mont Blanc, literally the "white mountain," which was not climbed until 1786, was imagined as one of Europe's most wild places.
- 2) To Shelley, wilderness was sublime; so extraordinary that it inspired awe. The sublime was a feeling often attributed to God. The sublime became of interest and was theorized in the 18th century by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.
- 3) Shelley wrote of this poem: "It was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe: and as an undisciplined Overflowing of the soul, rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang." This is Shelley trying to express the feeling of the sublime.
- 4) To Shelley, the environment (at least wilderness) is like a place of worship.
Thus thou, Ravine of Arve-dark, deep Ravine-
Thou many-colored, many-voicéd vale,
Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
Fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams: awful scene,
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down

From the ice-gulfs that gird his secret throne, Bursting
through these dark mountains like the flame Of
lightning through the tempest.
(ll. 13-19)

- 5) The Romantic poets transformed the Western concept of “Nature.” No longer is it something to be feared or exploited, but instead appreciated, perhaps even worshiped. In 21st-century America, we have fully inherited this view of wilderness.

Like the word “God,” the word “Nature” will now be capitalized.

- 6) Visually, the Romantic view of wilderness as sublime was perhaps best expressed in 1818, two years after “Mont Blanc,” by the German painter Caspar David Friedrich in his *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, “The wanderer above the sea of fog”

Mont Blanc, early in the 19th century and today

Mont Blanc dwarfs English mountains, such as the Fairfield Horseshoe

D) Thoreau, "Walden" (1854)

- 1) Technically, Thoreau is not a Romantic poet, though he shares much with them. Instead, Thoreau was part of the American Transcendentalist movement, founded by his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, which also romanticized wilderness. In addition to British Romanticism, Transcendentalists were influenced by German philosophy, Eastern religion, and mysticism.
- 2) Like the Romantics, Thoreau made a religion of wilderness, of “Nature.” Here is Thoreau on the back cover of a recent addition of *Walden*: “For naturalist, essayist, and early environmentalist Henry David Thoreau, nature was a religion.” Like Wordsworth, Thoreau moved to the country to be closer to “God.” (Note that the word “Nature” is capitalized, like “God.”)
- 3) Thoreau’s perspective on “Nature” must be understood as highly romanticized (even though he is not technically a “Romantic” poet). Because we have largely inherited Thoreau’s view of “Nature,” we cannot forget that this idea was culturally constructed - in part by Thoreau.

E) Thoreau's Background

- 1) Thoreau was born into a relatively wealthy background; he attended Harvard.

- 2) Although Thoreau enacted radical lifestyle changes by moving to Walden Pond, many working-class individuals at the time (especially those new to the U.S.) lived in similarly modest, and often far less desirable, conditions.
- 3) For example, Thoreau notes in Walden that his cabin was made from an older shanty purchased from an Irish laborer, James Collins, who lived there with his family of three: "I passed him and his family on the road. One large bundle held their all--bed, coffee-mill, looking-glass, hens."
- 4) Hence, even though Thoreau praises, and in fact lives in, a far more modest home than Ben Jonson extols in "To Penshurst," it is important to realize that, as relatively wealthy, he was free of economic motivation.
- 5) Walden is a bit of a how-to manual: how to live as if you are poor for those who are not.
- 6) While living at Walden Pond, Thoreau went into Concord nearly every day. His Walden experiment only lasted two years; after which he moved back to town and lived a life that was by all accounts like the Concord neighbors that he critiques in Walden.
- 7) Aside from Walden, Thoreau is also known as an early protestor of slavery.

In his famous essay on Civil Disobedience (1849), Thoreau helped develop the rationale for the modern passive resistance movement, which would be enormously influential on Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr.

- 8) In "Walden," Thoreau notes that "I was seized and put into jail, because, as I have elsewhere related, I did not pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the State which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle" (111)
- 9) Thoreau had in fact failed to pay taxes for six years. In "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau argued against actively (i.e. violently) protesting slavery, instead he favored withdrawing all support for the enterprise. If a majority of individuals did the same, slavery, according to Thoreau, would end.
- 10) Thoreau's Walden experiment can be seen as making a similar prescription: If adopted en masse, Thoreau's lifestyle could arguably end rampant consumerism.

F) Walden Pond

Walden Pond is located 20 miles from Boston, in what is still a relatively rural locale. Together with its surrounding wood, Walden Pond is approximately the same size as the UCSB campus. Walden is 1 mile from Concord MA.

- 1) The area around Walden Pond is not wilderness, in the sense that it has been extensively modified by human action:
- 2) The old-growth forest around the pond had been cut generations before Thoreau arrived there. In Walden, Thoreau mentions the rail line running through the area.