

"darkness" by lord
byron: humanity's
self-annihilation



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Written during The Year Without Summer of 1816, Lord Byron's apocalyptic poem "Darkness" reveals a world of chaos and pervading death due to the unremitting darkness and cold from the blocked out sun, the result of the dust in the air from a volcanic eruption. In the poem, society has collapsed and the human population is fighting for life by burning wood and feeding on wildlife. Men die by the masses, and the last two individuals perish by looking each other in the eyes. The world is left barren and devoid of life, with only darkness left. With his poem, Byron depicts the penultimate scene of man's existence after its selfish exploitation of nature. This paper will explore how in "Darkness", Byron uses the speaker's prophetic dream to depict the self-destructiveness of man's selfishness and his frailty in comparison to nature.

The poem's loose blank verse structure creates a steady, rhythmic pace to its progression, reflecting the permeating darkness. Iambic pentameter echoes the steadiness and monotony of religious sermons. Ironically, in the poem, "darkness" is personified and she herself has become the ruling, omnipotent force of "the universe" (82). Byron begins the poem by transporting the apocalypse from the safety of dreams into reality. In the first line, the speaker makes the assertion that his "dream was not all a dream" (1), indicating that the content of it is more significant than it is in the dream world. The next few lines fuses prophecy with reality, as images of natural elements associated with nighttime and dreams such as "stars" (2), "rayless[ness]" (4), "blind[ness]", and "black[ness]" (5) become part of day and transform day into night. The lucidity of the speaker's intuition and certainty sets an eerie, dream-like tone for the rest of the poem.

Man's suffering is the core of this poem, and Byron spends much of it portraying the extent of the darkness and cold's effects on society using fire as a motif. The people are constantly seeking fire. The " thrones, / the palaces of crowned kings" (10) are both metonyms for social order, and the burning of these structures reflects the social chaos caused by fear. The people are " living by watchfires" (10), and "[dwelling] within the eye / of the volcanos" (16) for heat. The desperation for fire is further exemplified by alliteration as forests are " burnt for beacons" (13) in " fearful hope" (18) for help. The emphasis on beacons suggests the hopelessness of man's situation, for the same trees used as beacons are also needed for warmth and therefore survival, even if temporary. The actions of humans here are self-destructing, and Byron begins to imply that humans have brought their own fate upon themselves.

As the poem progresses, humans are depicted increasingly less as pitiable beings and more as selfish creatures that have destroyed nature and subsequently destroyed themselves. Alliteration once again emphasizes the self-consuming nature of man, as some "[feed] / their funeral piles with fuel" (27). With funeral piles serving as a symbol for death, Byron presents man as essentially fueling their own demise. Humans are then contrasted with animals of the natural world as they " gnash'd their teeth and howl'd" (32), while birds, " terrified,... flutter on the ground, / and flap their useless wings" (33). Even the " wildest brutes / [are] tame and tremulous" (34), and vipers " stingless" and slain by humans for food (37). The animalistic characteristics of " gnash" and " howl" ascribed to the humans present them as savage. In contrast, the real animals are depicted as helpless and innocent. Such

reversal of the roles of nature is indicative of the selfishness of the men, and parallels the beginning of man's exploitive relationship with nature in Byron's time.

Byron's extensive use of fire also portrays the disintegration of man's humanity. In the desolation of darkness, men had "[forgotten] their passions" (7) for others. Fire signifies passion, a unique and key element of the human spirit. Having found no passion inside of them, men have turned to another source – nature – to burn and make up for their own lack of humanity. Man's degradation is also reflected – literally – in the faces of the two remaining enemies who, in the light of the "mockery" (64) flame, "beheld / each other's aspects... and died... of their mutual hideousness" (65). This startling portrayal of man's death by his own corruption is accompanied by the depiction of man's frailty in comparison to nature.

Unlike many other poems of the Romantic era, "Darkness" depicts the natural world as not a realm of solace or creative inspiration but as the antithesis of humanity that, despite all of man's savageness and exploitation, can always destroy him. In scene with the self-destructive enemies, the descriptions of the men reveal their true place in comparison to the forces of nature. In contrast to the fierceness of the wolf-like men at the beginning of the poem, these two men have "cold skeleton hands" (61) and "feeble breath" (62), and while "shivering" (61), try to gather "feeble ashes" from remains of their civilization (62) to create a fire which is only a "mockery" of the fire of nature. The repetition of "feeble" and the extra foot in line 61 that draws attention to the pathetic state of the men sheds light on the consequences of man's disharmony with nature: man's own destruction.

Although in "Darkness", nature is depicted as a victims of man's selfishness, Byron suggests that the natural world is ultimately the force of destruction, and that man's disregard for it will result in his own downfall due to his dependence on it. By the time humans are obliterated, the world is "seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless" (71). The use of asyndeton and the rapid progression from lack of life in nature to humanity is parallel to the power of the two; humanity is essentially nothing without nature's cooperation. Nature, above all, is portrayed as eternal, unlike man, who is mortal. The "rivers, lakes, and ocean [are] still" (73), and the "tides in their [own] grave" (78). The personification of nature's elements in lines 78-81, accompanied by the steady rhythm created by anaphora, illuminates in nature a sense of perpetuity despite its current stasis. Nature is once again put in opposition with humans; while man's activity was largely associated with fire, the essence of nature is captured by water and other natural forms often seen as tranquil, such as the "sea" (75), "waves" (78), "moon" (79), "air" (80), and "clouds" (81), in addition to those previously mentioned. Man, on the other hand, is fiery and savage, doomed to self-destruction when challenging the serenity of nature.

Byron's "prophecy" perhaps involves a third force, however, as nature itself has been silenced. This is Darkness herself, who has "no need / of aid from [nature]" (81), for "she [is] the universe" (83). Whether such powerful darkness is of the corrupt human mind or greater societal development or neither is the subject of another paper, as are the many Biblical references. The Industrial Revolution backdrop during which the poem was written brought about many new changes in the society that were threatening to

man's relationship with nature and the spirit and morals of man himself.

Although "Darkness" is dramatic and somewhat fantastic in Byron's depiction of the nature and the perishing men, it captures the increasingly self-centered and exploitative mentality of man during that era of furious economic development well, and how destructive the feeling of using others and nature to gain power likely is.