

Attaining the harmonious vision through the natural world



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From the 18th to the early 19th century, a wave of Romantic writers rose fervently against the emergence of industrialisation, resisting against the Industrial Revolution's intrusion upon the natural world. Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and female writers such as Joanna Baillie were among the many Romantic poets rising against this decline of nature. These poets often constructed binaries of the pastoral world and the metropolitan city in their literary compositions, usually privileging the former's rustic tranquillity over the latter's cluttered and chaotic landscape. Associated with this preference for the natural world was the Romantics' pursuit of a harmonious vision, which posits that any being containing a "centre within itself, as well as a centre outside itself" would strive "for greater harmony, [and] unity [in both spheres]" (Miller 85). Essentially, in the hopes of becoming a unified self, the Romantics envisioned an emotional and intellectual union with following: the divine, his physical environment - both of which are classified under the "centre outside" of an individual, as well as his inner self - the "centre within". With reference to Joanna Baillie's "London" (1800) and Samuel Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" (1798), I will explore how these three components - vital to the Romantics' pursuit of a harmonious vision, are cultivated through a communion with the pastoral world. This paper will also explore how metropolitan conditions hamper the union between individuals with their inner and external "spheres", hindering the achievement of the harmonious vision.

Briefly, "Frost at Midnight" chronicles the introspective journey of a solitary persona, whose experience in the "hush of nature" (Coleridge 17) permits his unimpeded exploration of inner thoughts. The persona thus gains an

appreciation for his environment and even comes to perceive it as God's "eternal language" (Coleridge 61). On the contrary, Joanna Baillie's "London" documents the jarring sights and sounds of the urban landscape, which emotionally displace the persona into a state of disconnect from her environment, and which distract her from a spiritual engagement with God. Baillie also illustrates the way in which confounding effects of urbanity potentially thwart the individual's connection with his or her inner self. While both poems demonstrate the possibility of acquiring spiritual awareness across metropolitan and natural landscapes, they also attest for how a proper, deep spiritual union with the divine is only attained through man's interaction with the natural world. As depicted in "Frost at Midnight", the "extreme silentness" of the natural world encourages "meditation" (Coleridge 10, 9), eminently elevating the speaker's level of spiritual concentration and awareness. Under the enchantment of "solitude" (Coleridge 5), Coleridge's speaker demonstrates his spiritual sensitivity even towards ordinary elements of nature such as the "Frost", which he sees as God's "eternal language", capable of performing a "ministry" (Coleridge 5, 1, 61, 73). By emblematising the constituents of the natural world as a system of divine symbols, the speaker sees his material surroundings as a portal through which the divine communicates with man, unconsciously articulating his sensitivity towards God's omnipresence within his immediate surroundings. This strong spiritual sense fostered in nature is further emphasised when the speaker proclaims that God "teach Himself in all/ and all things in himself" (Coleridge 63). Here, the line's inversion places God as central to all existence, as well as central to the speaker's relationship with the world. Therefore, an observation of the speaker's spiritual sensitivity and <https://assignbuster.com/attaining-the-harmonious-vision-through-the-natural-world/>

his reverence for God offers audience the insight of how an interaction with nature cultivates a deep, spiritual appreciation within man - which in turn, encourages his union with God.

Exiting from the pastoral world, the spiritual union between man and the divine appears unestablished and shallow in the concrete jungle of "London". While elements of the persona's immediate environment are interpreted as divine symbols in "Frost at Midnight", Baillie's persona displays a shallow perception of her environmental cues which are associated with the divine. In fact, the sole physical symbol of spiritual faith in the poem - "St. Pauls" church, is descriptively reduced into a mere "artful structure" (Baillie 5, 24), attributed no deeper, spiritual meaning by the persona herself. This reduction strips down the "Great[ness]" (Coleridge 64) and the essential personality of God that was amplified in "Frost at Midnight", mirroring the speaker's declined ability to comprehend the immaterial essence of God that possibly underlies the husk of the urban environment. This dampened sensitivity can be juxtaposed against the acute spiritual awareness of Romantic writers such as Coleridge, who in the natural world, often saw their surroundings as "imbued with the divine... Everyday natural elements such as flowers, stones ... were described as though they carried a bit of God within them" (Drobot 60). As opposed to the clarity of spiritual vision owned by characters situated in the natural world, the blurred spiritual sensitivity of Baillie's persona is arguably contributed by the urban clutter - for instance, the "swathing mist" of industrial fog which partially "conceal'd" (Baillie 21) the church. This visual concealment of the church's infrastructure metaphorically signifies the persona's stymied vision of God,

impeding a proper establishment of a union and connection between her and the divine. Therefore, even though both personas across the urban and pastoral spaces exhibit their recognition towards physical cues associated with spiritual faith, Baillie's persona remains distracted by her emphasis on the material clutter of London, rather than on the immateriality of God.

Conversely, Coleridge's persona establishes a comprehensive appreciation of God through the natural world, enabling him to attain a harmony with the "centre" beyond himself. Expounding on the next component of man's relationship with his external "sphere", both poems testify for how the pastoral world, rather than urbanity, facilitates an emotional union between the individual and his or her physical environment. The fraught connection between characters and their environment in urbanity is demonstrated by "Frost at Midnight", where Coleridge's persona recounts his prison-like school in the "great city" as an institution with "bars" (Coleridge 53, 26).

Symbolically, these "bars" reflect the stifling and depressing atmosphere of institutionalised grounds, which at the same time, express the persona's sense of alienation amidst the hostile atmosphere of urbanity. Baillie elaborates similar feelings of repulsion which her speaker harbours towards "London". She documents "Cataracts of tawny sheen pour[ing] from the skies" (Baillie 31) - using the imagery of disease to highlight her awareness towards the metropolitan landscape's degraded condition. Also, by infusing emotions of "rage" into her illustration of urban "streets" (30, 28), Baillie's pathetic fallacy conveys her speaker's anxiety, provoked by the urban clutter which consists of "furnace smoke" and "tinted vapours" (32, 33). This discomposure is further exposed by Baillie's alliteration when she notes the "

curling columns rise" (32), stressing on harsh alliterative tones to parallel the pervasiveness of industrial smoke, and in extension, the oppressive atmosphere of the city weighing down on the urban dweller. This unpleasantness is also intensified by the poem's masculine rhyme scheme - "... She seems a curtain'd gloom/ ... a threat'ning sign of doom" (Baillie 17, 18). The masculine rhyme scheme, developed upon the speaker's entrance into London from line 17, places great emphasis on rhyming words "gloom" and "doom" - magnifying the speaker's assumption of her urban experience as a fearful and ominous one. This rise of rhyming consistency also quickens the pace of the poem, hinting at the unsettling sensations stirring within the persona and likely, a budding desire to retreat from the urban clutter. In summary, Baillie's pessimistic shift in tone as her speaker transits from "Hampstead" into "sublime" (Baillie 2, 17) London, along with Coleridge's unfavourable portrayal of the "great city" (Coleridge 53), closely mirrors sensations of uneasiness arising from interactions with the metropolitan world.

This emotional discomfort triggered by the atmosphere of the urban world precludes an emotional union between these personas and their physical environment. While such hostility pervades the relationship between individuals and their physical environment in the urban world, the natural world is constructed as a site which catalyses an intimate connection between both. For example, Coleridge's persona perceives the pastoral world as a site of imaginative escape during his London school days - recounting his "sweet birth-place" with the memory of "church-tower" bells that "... rang/.../So sweetly..." (Coleridge 29, 30, 32). The repetition of the word "

sweet", and the auditory imagery of ringing bells project nature as an Arcadian, idyllic, dream-like setting where the persona is able to experience a sense of belonging and ease. Moreover, with the motif of "sleep" and slumber (Coleridge 36, 45, 7), and with the situation of a "cradled infant" (Coleridge 7) as the poetic subject of "Frost at Midnight", Coleridge constructs the natural world as a site of restoration and comfort, a place capable of providing relief from urban pressures. This concept of nature as a sanctuary is sustained by "London", whose speaker notes that Hampstead stands at a "healthy height" where one can spot the "hills of Surrey Shine" (Baillie 2, 11). Firstly, Baillie's specific diction "healthy" and "Shine" paints the country as a place of radiance, and of restored health as opposed to the degraded condition of the city. Secondly, the gentle alliteration in both lines evokes a light-hearted atmosphere, and when accompanied by the regulated rhythm of an aabcbc ddefef rhyme scheme, (lines 5-16) sets up a comfortable poetic pace. This linguistic gentleness accompanied by a comfortable rhythm mirrors the speaker's sense of ease encouraged by the pastoral setting, whom like Coleridge, experiences an emotional union with their physical environment through the natural world. The final component to fulfilling the harmonious vision includes man's union with the sphere "within" - a communion with the inner self.

Primarily, the Romantics were concerned with this harmony as they insisted that "the true meaning and purpose of life lie in the finding ... of the inner Self", for this "forms the point of contact between the individual and the infinite spiritual reality." (Menhennet 19). In exploration of this final condition to achieving the harmonious vision, a comparison between both poems will

prove that the individual's connection with the inner self is strengthened in the natural world, as opposed to in the urban landscape. In both poems, characters are positioned in solitude - allowing for each to notice the "musings" (Coleridge 6), "thoughts and feelings" (Baillie 49) generated by the inner self. Although these instances prove that a receptivity towards the inner self is present in both poems, the degree of this receptivity varies according to the environment which the individual is situated in. For Coleridge, the "deep calm" and "extreme silentness" (8, 10) of the natural world promotes a greater understanding of the "inner Self", as demonstrated by the poetic form of "Frost at Midnight": "But thou, my babe! Shalt wander like a breeze By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds, (Coleridge, 55-57) As evidenced by the extract above, the poem adopts an iambic pentameter with blank verse - conveying the flexible and natural expression of the inner psyche. With the omission of a fixed rhyme scheme, Coleridge conveys the manner in which the poet moves in unity with the flow of thought, in the natural world. This harmony between the persona and his inner thought is further indicated by caesurae present throughout the poem, such as in line 55 - "But thou, my babe! Shalt wander like a breeze", where punctuation and pauses document the unfiltered, informal expressions channelled by the poet's inner contemplations. This spontaneity of poetic form parallels the "momentary pauses of the thought" - the unrestricted expression of the inner self, in the uncomplicated natural landscape ideal for "meditation" (Coleridge 48, 9). Notably, this natural world encourages the individual's understanding of his inner mind, which in turn, strengthens the relationship

between him and his inner self. In contrast, Baillie's persona exemplifies how the cluttered city landscape erodes her comprehension of the inner self.

Upon transiting into London from Hampstead, the poet switches from an unhurried poetic pace, into a largely consistent, masculine, aabbccdd rhyme scheme which extends throughout the rest of poem: "What hollow sound is that?" approaching near The roar of many wheels breaks on his ear, It is the flood of human life in motion! It is the voice of a tempestuous ocean! (Baillie 43-46) Coupled with iambic pentameter, the rising rhythmic consistency of the poem echoes the uncontrollable rush of emotions caused by the overwhelming "roar" and "flood" (Baillie 44, 45) of activities in the city centre which leaves one's inner psyche in disarray. On one hand, this rise in rhythmic consistency mirrors the agitation of emotions upon entrance into London, stunting the persona's capacity for deep contemplation. On the other hand, the rigidity of the rhyme scheme reflects how the anxious emotions of the persona excessively restrains, and leads to an ungentle expression of the inner mind - creating a distance between the speaker and her inner self. Consequently, the effects of urbanity leave the urban dweller's inner thoughts unresolved and unanswered - as reflected by the "mingled, melancholy" thoughts of the "distant traveller[s]" "restless, reckless" mind (Baillie 50, 37, 51) at the end of the poem. The effect of alliteration in these two lines emphasises the character's futile attempts of reconciling with his inner thoughts amidst urban distractions, leaving most of them "undefined" (Baillie 50) and unanswered. Therefore, even though the metropolitan world proves itself as a space capable of evoking responses from the inner self, it remains uncondusive in conducting a reconciliation

between characters and their interiority. On the contrary, the undisturbed tranquillity of the pastoral world creates a solipsistic space for contemplation, fostering a strong harmony and comprehensive understanding between man and the inner self.

In conclusion, a comparison between “ Frost at Midnight” and “ London” justifies the Romantics’ fervent inclination towards the natural world during the age of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. The conversation between both poems reasserts the Romantic belief that the natural world is where individuals restate as unified wholes, for a return to the pastoral world is defined as the ultimate solution to reconnecting with the “ spheres” within and beyond oneself. In essence, nature is the Arcadian and idyllic world where man experiences a palpable spiritual communion with God, an emotional union with their material environment, and a connection with their inner self. Contrastingly, the oppressive atmosphere of urbanity promotes feelings of repulsion and emotional disconnect within the urban dweller, thus depriving him or her of a connection with the three entities vital to the fulfilment of the harmonious vision. As such, it is the solace of the natural world which the metropolitan landscape lacks that renders this harmonious vision achievable by the Romantics - for the natural world facilitates inner contemplation, while offering comfort and ease to its dwellers at the same time.

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