

In the fast paced world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it appears that the human race disregards nature as a thing of importance. Where forests and fields once stood, large cities and long highways have taken over. While most still find nature to be beautiful, the idea that nature plays an active role in the lives of individuals as well as in society is lost and gone. However, in the era of Romantic literature, the active role of nature was at a peak. Interestingly, the Romantics did not simply see one role of nature, but two opposing roles. This idea is prevalent throughout many works of the greatest Romantic authors such as Mary Shelley, William Wordsworth, Samuel T. Coleridge, and Thomas Dequincy. Within the writings of these authors one finds that nature acts as a symbol of beauty and as a healer of the emotionally distressed as well as sublime and harmful force to both the individual and society and its institutions. In doing so, nature acts as a judicator; it helps those who appreciate nature and punishes those who abuse it.

In the novel Frankenstien by Mary Shelley, nature is both beautiful and healing to the lonely monster after suffering the pains of rejection by society. The monster's unnatural size and ugly appearance drives his own creator to abandon him at his birth. As a result, the monster finds his way to the woods where he first becomes accustomed to his new senses. Once his sense of sight becomes more accurate, the monster comments on the Moon, which he "fixed his eyes on...with pleasure" (Shelley 80). Thus, from the time of his birth the monster sees nature and its elements as a thing of beauty and a source of pleasure. The monster, after a period of time, makes two attempts to integrate into society, both of which times he is feared and physically attacked. Although the monster becomes angry and distraught, he is comforted by nature which has the ability to change his emotions. The monster states, "the day, which was one of the first of spring,

cheered even me by the loveliness of its sunshine and the balminess of the air. I felt emotions of gentleness and pleasure, that had long appeared dead, revive within me” (Shelley 115). Therefore, when the monster has unjustifiably been physically and emotionally harmed, it is nature who is his healer. The monster had appreciated nature and its beauty; he developed his senses in the natural setting of the woods and sought refuge in the mountains when he had become an outcast of society. As a result, nature could act as the judge who grants the monster temporary tranquility.

Nature’s ability to heal one’s distraught emotions is evident in another character in Frankenstein as well; this character is Victor Frankenstein. Throughout many instances in Victor’s tale to the mariner, Victor describes instances of extreme distress and depression. It is at these times when nature restored in Victor a happy or peaceful demeanor while returning him to a functional level of living. The first time nature displays this effect on Victor is several months after the creation of the monster, a time during which Victor had fallen terribly ill out of the distress in creating the monster. Victor describes the “young buds shooting from the trees” outside his window (Shelley 41). He then states that “It was a divine spring; and the season contributed greatly to my convalescence” (Shelley 41). It is evident that Victor’s positive description of the buds on the trees confirms his view of nature as physically beautiful. Furthermore, he clearly states that the spring season was a primary factor in his reestablished “cheerful” disposition (Shelley 41). Even more remarkable is nature’s ability to give Victor’s pained soul a sense of peacefulness even after the deaths of his brother William and close friend Justine. This is seen when Victor says, “as I gazed on the cloudless blue sky, I seemed to drink in a tranquility to which I had long been a stranger” (Shelley 129). This

line embodies the power of nature to fill him with serenity at such a troubled time.

Although Victor may seem unworthy of such medicine because of the unnatural monster he creates, Victor did not physically abuse or destroy nature or its natural settings. As a result, nature can provide for Victor at times when no human can.

Similar to Victor Frankenstein and the monster in Frankenstein, William Wordsworth as an individual is healed by nature and its beauty in the poem "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abby." When standing above the bank of the Wye River, Wordsworth describes the landscape before him that he had not visited in five years. The use of such words as "sweet" and "quiet" in this description conveys Wordsworth's positive regard towards nature as a symbol of beauty and tranquility (Wordsworth 4, 8). However, it is not while describing this moment that Wordsworth is healed of any distress. It is the remembrance of such natural "forms of beauty" that can instill a sense of peace within his soul when he is apart from the river bank (Wordsworth 24). Wordsworth states that he has owed these images of the bank

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood and felt along the heart,  
And passing even into my purer mind  
With tranquil restoration (Wordsworth 28-31)

It is clear from this line that the health of Wordsworth's heart, body, and mind can be restored simply from Nature and past images of its beauty. Since Wordsworth is a man who, in the poem has not performed any physical wrongdoings against nature, nature can fairly repress Wordsworth's weariness by filling his mind with its beautiful images. It

can also act as “the nurse” and “the guide” who aids a man in need back to health (Wordsworth 110-111).

Interestingly Nature can embody the role of a healer to society as well as the individual such as in Samuel T. Coleridge’s “The Dungeon.” In “The Dungeon,” Coleridge suggests that Nature can replace the institution of the prison in reforming criminals to a stabilized and healthy human state. Although those who take on the role of the criminal have performed indecencies to society, man’s condemnation will not correct their divergent ways. Instead, Coleridge argues that the “dungeon” will only further damage the criminal who is

Circled with evil, till his very soul  
Unmoulds its essence, hopelessly deformed  
By sights of ever more deformity! (16-19)

Thus, the dungeon, which is a lonely and dreadful place filled only with evil, will only continue to disfigure the criminal soul. However, if the criminal were to be placed in nature, he would be cured of his ways. Coleridge suggests that submerging the criminal in Nature’s “sunny hues,” “fair forms,” and “melodies of woods, and winds, and waters” would cause the criminal to concede to nature’s beauty (23-24). The power of nature’s beauty would overcome the criminal’s resistance to societal morality. As a result, the criminals “angry” soul will be “healed and harmonized” (Coleridge 29). Therefore, Nature can replace society’s prison institutions and take on the role as healer and reformer of convicts’ criminal ways. Nature can take on this role because these criminals have not physically abused or performed any wrongdoings against Nature, but only against their fellow man.

In contrast to these pleasant examples of Nature, the prose piece “Confessions of an Opium Eater” demonstrates Nature as an unsightly and harmful force. This piece demonstrates Nature’s role to the individual as Thomas De Quincey recounts his experience with the drug opium. During the various hallucinations and dreams he underwent while influenced by the drug, De Quincey saw horrid natural images that threatened his existence. From the beginning of his descriptions, the reader receives the immediate impression that Nature is neither calm nor beautiful. This is evident when De Quincey states that his “mind tossed, as it seemed, upon the billowy ocean, and weltered upon the weltering waves” (393 – 394). The ocean that De Quincey is submerged in is active. Instead of instilling tranquility, the swelling of the water and the jumbling of the waves places De Quincey in a state of extreme confusion. As De Quincey’s wild dream descriptions continue, more harmful and unattractive scenes begin to emerge. He explains that many of his dreams contained “ugly birds, or snakes, or crocodiles” and that “the cursed crocodile became to [him] the object of more horror than all the rest.” (395). While many of nature’s creatures are beautiful and harmless, it is the ugly, fierce, and lethal animals that persist in haunting De Quincey. The crocodile, which generates the most distress in De Quincey, instills fear in him as he explains one look from its “leering eye” feels more like thousands of repeated looks (395). The crocodile’s continuous reappearance in De Quincey’s dreams is unavoidable to him because he cannot stop his addiction to opium. Since opium comes from nature, De Quincey is performing a wrongful act against nature by abusing it. Thus nature is acting as a judge in sentencing a punishment to De Quincey for his addiction by tantalizing him solely with its ugly and harmful side.

A similar representation of nature to the “Confessions of an Opium Eater” is Samuel T. Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Kahn” in which Nature acts harmfully against society’s monarchical institution. In “Kubla Kahn,” the monarchical system is represented by the king who demands a “pleasure-dome” to be built on a fertile piece of land (Coleridge 2). As a result, the land, which has been placed under restriction, fights back against the structures upon it and creates a chasm which destroys the dome. This chasm, which Coleridge describes as “savage” and from which “ceaseless turmoil [is] seething,” represents a dark and violent view of nature. Coleridge describes the sacred river Alph that the dome was built near as being thrown through the chasm when he says:

Amid whose swift half – intermitted burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail (20 – 22)

This description of the river and the chasm represents nature as being forceful and harmful. This is evident in the use of the words “burst” and “vaulted.” In addition, the metaphor concerning the harvester and the grain further develops the nature’s power against the dome as the ease of the grain being tossed by the harvester’s instrument is compared with the ease that the earth propels the rock and water from the chasm.

Although this is similar to “Confessions of an Opium Eater,” there is one large difference between the two. In “Kubla Kahn,” the reader witnesses a transition from nature as being beautiful to being dark and sublime. In the beginning of the poem, the pleasure dome is built around such natural beauty as “gardens bright” (Coleridge 8). However, the king, who believes he has the power to limit the boundaries of nature with “walls and towers” to build the pleasure dome, feels the wrath of nature and sees its destructive side.

Nature's reaction to the king represents the role of nature to society's monarchical system. The monarchy believes itself to be more powerful than nature by restricting it. However, nature, takes on the role of reminding the monarchy of the severely limited power it holds. Furthermore, nature is acting as a judicator in punishing the king for his abuse in restricting nature. Nature carries out this judgment with its ability to be sublime and harmful, and forceful.

From these various works that were prominent in the Romantic period it is easy to see how nature can take on the role of the beautiful healer or of the harmful, sublime force. However, nature changes its role only when it is judicially correct to do so. This would entail a crime against nature and its physical settings. The idea of this dual role of nature is a significant point to address because it brings further insight to a topic so prevalent throughout Romantic literature as well as raises interesting questions regarding the Romantic view of religion. According to Romantic ideology, piety is said to reside within nature. As Wordsworth put it quite nicely, he lives his life by "natural piety" (Wordsworth 9). In stating this, nature and religion are equated to one another as they exist on the same level in the universe. Therefore, can one conclude that the Romantics thought religion is both healing and harmful as well?