
TAKE ME TO THE LAKES WHERE ALL THE POETS WENT TO DIE:

NATURE, ROMANTICISM AND ECOCRITICISM

WHAT ARE THE SONGS ABOUT?

NEW ROMANTICS

What are the New Romantics according to Taylor Swift? What are their defining characteristics?

- ❖ The New Romantics are described as optimistic people who remain positive even when everything has turned out for the worst.
 - *"I could build a castle out of all the bricks you threw at me"*
 - *"Heartbreak is our national anthem, we sing it proudly"*
 - *"We're too busy dancing to get knocked of our feet"*
- ❖ The "New Romantic" was also a movement from the 1970's where people would not feed into gender roles and standards.

Why "new"? Why "romantics"?

- ❖ Link to the literary movement
 - Escapism: escape into nature ⇒ the New Romantics are kind of like dreamers
- ❖ The New Romantics as a new generation
- ❖ *"The best people in life are free"* ⇒ free from restrictions, expectations, suffocation, ...
- ❖ "New" ⇒ a new way of escaping (in music, friendships, ...)

What oppositions do you find in the lyrics?

- ❖ Turning negative things into positive things
- ❖ *"Heartbreak is our national anthem, we sing it proudly"* ⇒ juxtapositions
 - An anthem is a public thing, shared with lots of people, however heartbreak is often private, something you don't want to be public.
 - An anthem is linked with pride, while heartbreak is generally not something people are proud of.

General comments:

- ❖ Castle motif: ties in with the "road to ruin" – classical landscapes → typical for Romanticism and Gothic literature

OUT OF THE WOODS

General comments:

- ❖ “*The monsters turned out to be just trees*” ⇒ reference to Snow White: when running from the hunter, it is dark in the woods, Snow White is scared and thinks the trees are monsters. When she calms down, she realizes they are just trees.
- ❖ Reference to other TS song: “Happiness” – “*above the trees*”
- ❖ Nature is portrayed as being hostile, especially in the music video:
 - Thorny branches and vines trying to catch her, slowing her down.
 - The ice and water.
 - In the end, she’s at a serene beach which contrasts the other images.
 - Symbolism: when she stops resisting the natural elements, they become less hostile, which links with a Romantic journey, a journey of self-discovery – returning to nature might be just what she needed
 - “She lost him, but she found herself, and somehow that was everything”
- ❖ Out of the woods = you are out of the woods when the difficult part of something is over. It can also be related to something that can be dangerous or risky, so when you’re out of the woods, you have passed the most dangerous part of it, but the whole situation is not over yet.
- ❖ Romantic symbolism

THE LAKES

General comments:

- ❖ Morbid imagery in a way – “Take me to the lakes where all the poets went to die” >< However, this also indicates that nature is where you can feel at peace and have a peaceful death.
- ❖ Modernity
- ❖ In the Romantic period, the poet was someone who stood out of society and who belonged to nature instead → the idea of not belonging to modernity, was one of the key ideas associated with Romanticism.
- ❖ Nature as a reflection of your own feelings and emotions.
 - Nature is a spot where you can return to in order to release your emotions.
- ❖ Pathetic fallacy – The landscape is described through the lens of the speaker.
- ❖ Romantic symbolism
 - The Lake District
 - Elegies, eulogizing
- ❖ Interesting use of wisteria:
 - “*I want to watch wisteria grow right over my bare feet*”
 - Wisteria takes a long time to grow → Taking the time to stand still and let time pass by.
- ❖ ≠ Romantic poem → If it was truly a Romantic poem, the muse would be the landscape, however in “The Lakes”, a person is addressed.

- ❖ “Tell me what are my **words worth**”
 - Link to Wordsworth, the poet.
 - Question of what one’s creative output is worth? → Meta song: self-referential to one’s own creative process.

IVY

General comments:

- ❖ Metaphor of infidelity
- ❖ Hostile, dark imagery (death)
- ❖ Use of “tarnished”
 - Tarnished silver: silver that is less shiny than it was, it’s turning out grey or is getting black spots. It is not new anymore.
 - Link to infidelity: when something is tarnished, it is not quite dirty, but kind of – she’s damaged goods in some way, she’s less shiny and “not new” anymore.
- ❖ Romantic – Even in this dark imagery, she can put some hope in their as well
- ❖ Juxtapositions:
 - “Grieving for the living”
 - “My house of stone, your ivy grows”
 - “Tarnished but so grand”
- ❖ Imagery of spring, blooming, the moon:
 - Link to female reproduction? → symbol of being pregnant?
- ❖ “Ivy” is used as example for her “quill lyrics”.

WILLOW

General remarks:

- ❖ Modernity vs. nature
 - Reference to train and tracks → symbol of industrialization, which was something the Romantics were anxious about.
- ❖ She needs a sense of belonging → The train is a symbol of her journey: where she was, where she is at the moment and where she wants to go.
- ❖ Double meaning of “train” → a name that is often giving to a wedding dress.
 - In the music video, she is wearing a dress that reminds of a wedding gown.
- ❖ Nature is often feminized → In the song it is masculinized to some extent – her partner symbolizes nature:
 - Interesting take – Her partner is nature; he has the power.
 - “Lost in your current like a priceless wine”
 - “Life was a willow and it bent right through your wind”
 - “As if you were a mythical thing”

- In the music video, she's following a string of light that's taking her through different landscapes until she finds the man she's looking for → the string of light also represents her partner.
→ *"Wherever you stray I follow"*
- ❖ Juxtapositions:
 - *"The more you say, the less I know"* → rational certainty is breaking down.

IS TAYLOR SWIFT SINGING US BACK TO NATURE?

Article by Jeff Opperman

How?

- ❖ Taylor uses lots of natural elements in her lyrics:
 - "Ms. Swift uses nature-themed words seven times as frequently as the other pop songs do" (Opperman 2)
 - "The language of nature has been steadily draining from the vocabulary of our culture. With these sister albums, Ms. Swift pushes back hard on that trend" (Opperman 1).
- ❖ Her albums Folklore and Evermore were written during the pandemic, when she, and lots of other people, returned to nature → Albums with the most natural elements out of all her work
 - Interesting question: would these albums have existed without the pandemic?
- ❖ Taylor keeps existing symbols of flowers alive
 - For example: roses for true love, daisies for purity

Why does Taylor Swift use all these nature related words, themes and concepts? Why does it matter?

- ❖ Taylor is, in a way, going against the grain – The culture we consume today mediates and shakes our actual reality: the less we hear about nature, the less we will connect and relate to it in real life.
 - We spend most of our lives in urban environments, on our phones, etc. ⇒ we often forget about nature and certainly don't return to it often.
 - There are surveys done of children that were asked to name different types of trees or fruit, which they couldn't do. But when asked to name different logo's of corporate brands, they were able to do so.
→ If children are exposed to natural elements, they will at least have a different attitude towards it.
- ❖ Macro level vs. micro level:
 - We don't need novels and poems that talk about big concepts like climate change. What WILL do us good are these little references to nature.
 - Subtle imagery and suggestions (micro) will have a bigger effect on people than when something focuses on climate change, wildlife extinction, and other issues that occur

on a global scale (macro) ⇒ this is overwhelming and makes people zone out. A walk in the park with your friends is less scary and will prevent people from zoning out ⇒ the micro level makes dealing with nature more manageable, tangible and plausible.

- Taylor's music and songs are a good start for this – It shares a positive attitude towards nature, but in a subtle way, with subtle images.
→ "They are a step toward reversing the decline of nature in pop culture, and that matters. If we want to change the world to safeguard nature, and ourselves, we first have to see it. Art can do that."

HOW DO WE DEFINE "NATURE"?

Nature is a tricky term:

- ❖ Lots of different meanings (Oxford Dictionary: 34 different ones)
- ❖ Perhaps the most complex word in the language (Raymond Williams)
- ❖ Nature is always already contaminated by the human and by language (Bennet & Royle)
- ❖ There is no nature except as it is constituted by acts of political definition (Alan Liu)
→ Always be aware that this is a very subjective term that you always need to qualify and define when used in a paper. What do you exactly mean by nature? And why do you give it or use this particular definition?

PLANT BLINDNESS (NATURE BLINDNESS)

Definition by James Wandersee & Elisabeth Schussler:

- a) The inability to see or notice the plants in one's environment.
- b) The inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs.
- c) The inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the life forms that belong to the Plant Kingdom.
- d) The misguided anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals and thus, as unworthy of consideration.

A cause can be urbanization and migration → In lots of cultures and communities, where it was valued to have knowledge on indigenous plants etc., this sense of knowledge is decreasing due to increasing urbanization and migration.

ECOCRITICISM

What is ecocriticism?

= "Analyzing ways in which literature engages with the destruction of nature, and with the relationship between humanity and the biosphere" (Bennet & Royle)

- ❖ Ecocritics believe that our relationship to nature is heavily mediated by language: the less we hear about it in daily life, the less we will connect with it.
- ❖ Important question: How does language play a role in our view of nature in daily life?
- ❖ Ecocriticism does not always focus on the destruction of nature.
- ❖ The discussion of nature tends to often be framed in terms of constructed/arbitrary oppositions/binaries/dualisms.
 - For example: nature vs. culture – nature = wild & untamed, culture = education, control
 - This was the dominating view in the time of colonialism.
 - Today, it is often argued that this was/is a wrong dichotomy.
- ❖ Ecocritics will research whether certain oppositions really are oppositions or whether they actually go hand in hand in a way.
- ❖ “A change of scale and vision: rather than an obsession with human-sized objects, ecocriticism attends both to the miniature realm of a blade of grass, an ant, an amoeba, or pathogen, and to the mega-scale of the ocean, the mountain, or even the earth itself (as well as everything in between)” (Bennet & Royle)
- ❖ Hyper objects (Timothy Morton) → For example: the melting of ice caps is so big and vast, and disconnected from us. It's such a slow and microscopic process that it becomes hard for us to wrap our heads around it. How can we actually comprehend it? However, this is something we also have to think about instead of only focusing on our own lives.

HOW DOES ALL OF THIS RELATE TO TAYLOR SWIFT?

WILLOW – MUSIC VIDEO

Unhostile relationships between people and nature are promoted:

- ❖ Taylor is part of a tree, walks out of it into a forest.
- ❖ She dives into the water.
- ❖ She's part of pagan ritual that takes place in snowy woods.

OUT OF THE WOODS – MUSIC VIDEO

Natural elements run throughout the video, hostile relationships with nature become unhostile:

- ❖ Taylor is covered in the branches of a tree → she becomes one with nature
 - Popular image in pop culture:
 - Harry Potter
 - Disney (Snow White, Sleeping Beauty)
 - Lord Of The Rings
 - The forest in Narnia

ECOPHOBIA

Lots of imagery about nature taking over human is seen in cinematography and pop culture:

- ❖ The whomping willow in Harry Potter
- ❖ Natural elements in Jumanji
- ❖ Groot (Guardians of the Galaxy)
- ❖ Star Wars
- ❖ The Evil Dead
- ❖ Jonh Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* → the triffids are 'just' plants until they start walking around and kill the people around them

→ Plant horror: plants are often used as elements of horror that take over everything

→ This type of imagery has left an unpleasant view on nature for some, which lead to the phenomenon of ecophobia.

WHAT IS ECOPHOBIA?

- ❖ "The ecophobic condition exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment" (Simon Estok).
- ❖ Ecophobic views can exist on different levels and about different things:
 - Micro level: pulling out weeds from the garden.
 - Macro level: fear of woods, fear of wolves.
 - An ecophobic view of the woods → the woods are a place of fear, a place we shouldn't venture into.
- ❖ Such views lead to ecophobic responses being cultivated inside of us.
 - For example, when a rainforest is brought down, we don't really care for it.
- ❖ We don't always notice ecophobic responses, just in the way that we don't always notice possible plant blindness.
- ❖ Ecophobia ties in with our negligent view of nature and how we lack language to talk about it.
- ❖ Important question to ask ourselves:
 - How is our response to plant growth mediated by popular culture?
 - This way, we might come to the realization that we have certain ideologies we didn't know of. We have to define these ideologies: what they mean and what consequences they carry for our outlook on nature.

ROMANTICISM, NATURE AND EMOTION

PREFACE TO THE *LYRICAL BALLADS* BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

- ❖ Published in the second edition.
- ❖ Sets out the poetic principles of the collection, which Wordsworth co-authored with Coleridge.
- ❖ A Poetic “manifesto” where Wordsworth sets out ideas of what a poet and poetry should be:
 1. Poetry should focus on situations from common life and express them in common language.
 - Poetry was not necessarily a benchmark of success.
 2. Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.
 - It should not necessarily be concentratedly crafted, it should be a flood of inspiration that flows over you, and that’s when you write poetry.
 3. The poet is a normal man, but one who has a gift that enables him to express thoughts and feelings better than the normal man.
 - In other words, the poet is a normal person, just like you and me, but just slightly better.
 4. The main function of poetry is to give pleasure.
 - Poetry shouldn’t be meant to solely make money.

→ Lots of the ideas we link to inspirations and creativity today, has roots in the Romantic period.

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ROMANTICISM, NATURE, AND EMOTION?

Or why might the type of poet Wordsworth advocates, and the way in which he(/she) writes, be particularly interested in/suited to writing about nature?

- ❖ In Japanese culture, the influences of nature are unending.
 - For example, Haikus are always about nature.
- ❖ Romanticism is about the spontaneous overflow of emotions, while nature is what people know

→ connecting these two together is important.
- ❖ Important idea of Romanticism:
 - Write what you feel, let your emotions take over and let them run them free.
- ❖ The idea of the sublime – The feeling of being swept away by nature. Nature is bigger than you, it even has something dangerous to it, because it can be unpredictable, but at the same time it is also divine.
 - Nature reminds of how small we are in our universe, we are insignificant, nature is bigger than us.
- ❖ Wordsworth was of the opinion that poetry should be for the common people, so poets should focus on topics that common people know → nature is a topic that everyone knows.
 - Importance of historical context – His preface was written in the early industrialization. During that time, lots of people still lived or spent a great deal of their lives in rural environments, so back then, nature was still common for most people.
 - Today, this is less the case.
- ❖ Escapism → Sense of escaping into nature, which is something everyone can do.

- Troubled perspective – In the 18th century, nature meant work for lots of people, so not everyone had the privilege to actually escape into nature.
- To be able to do so, was a sign of class (working class vs. middle/upper middle class).
- ❖ Connection between nature and emotion:
 - A sense of rawness → Nature just *is*; it's wild, unrefined, you can't control it. Emotion is also something you often cannot control; it also just *is*.

ASPECTS OF ECOCRITICISM

→ FURTHER EXPLANATIONS IN BENNET AND ROYLE'S "ECO" (ON UFORA).

- ❖ **Anthropocentrism**
 - A way of thinking where humans are the forefront.
 - Anthropocene: the scene we live in today, where humans are at the forefront. We prioritize humans and think in very human-related terms.
- ❖ **Ecophobia**
- ❖ **A change of scale and/or vision**
- ❖ **Externality**
 - "The idea that there is an environment elsewhere, outside of our immediate habitat available for exploitation - another village, town or region, another country or, best of all, another continent or even another planet" (Bennet & Royle 164).
- ❖ **Deep ecology**
 - "An environmental movement that rejects the notion of 'sustainable development' and suggests that capitalism, progress, even Western liberalism itself is responsible for the current ecological crisis that afflicts the world" (Bennet & Royle 167).
- ❖ **Ethics of the future**
 - "While ecology is concerned with the suffering of millions of people on the planet today whose lives are compromised or indeed wasted by environmental destruction and mismanagement, it is also necessarily future-oriented" (Bennet & Royle 165).
 - "Ecocriticism therefore demands a rethinking of ethics, extending the notion of our responsibility for others unpredictably into the future, since those others include people yet to be born, as well as those who will live after our death" (Bennet & Royle 165).
- ❖ **Anthropomorphism**
 - Providing non-human life with human characteristics.
 - We don't know what it's like to be an animal or to be a plant, so we think about them in human terms, which is not always necessary.
- ❖ **Ecofeminism**
 - "Ecofeminism attends in particular to the figurative language in which women and nature are presented and it responds to ways in which nature and the feminine are often linked in a gesture that denigrates both" (Bennet & Royle 167)
- ❖ **Binaries, oppositions and dualisms**