

ECHOES OF CATASTROPHE: LORD BYRON AND PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY AS ECODOOM PESSIMISTS

HARIZ AFTAB

*Doctoral Researcher, Department of English
School of Humanities, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab*

TUYBA FATIMA BHAT

*Doctoral Researcher, Department of English
School of Humanities, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab*

SANA ANJUM

*Doctoral Researcher, Department of English
School of Humanities, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab*

Abstract

Climate impacts the creativity of artists significantly. Climate change conceived by Tambora eruption (1815) considerably influenced the writings of Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley. This paper attempts to examine the poetry of the selected poets to analyse the influence of the eruption on their imagination, embedding an incipient form of ecodoom pessimism. Through close readings of Byron's "Darkness" (1816), "The Prisoner of Chillon" (1816), Manfred (1817), and Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1817) and Mont Blanc" (1817), this study reveals how their works articulate a deep anxiety about natural forces as both powerful and vengeful. Byron and Shelley foreshadow modern ecological despair, capturing the sense of foreboding which parallels the contemporary characterization of eco-anxiety. This paper highlights how their poetry resonates the environmental challenges, amplifying their enduring relevance as eco-conscious thinkers.

Keywords: *byron, environmental pessimism, poetry, shelley, tambora*

Introduction

The eruption of Mount Tambora (1815) is one of the most disastrous volcanic eruptions in human history which discharged 150 cubic kilometers of tephra that permeated into the atmosphere up to 1,300 kilometers (Mount Tambora Volcano). The eruption initiated with a massive explosion initially considered gunfire and heard in Sumatra, more than 2,600 kilometers away (Raffles 246). Combining particles of the volcano, mist, magmatic gases, and air, the volcano generated pyroclastic flows (lava flow) that flowed down the peninsula and destroyed the peninsula. Moderate tsunamis flooded coastal waters of a number of islands in the Indonesian archipelago (Stothers 1192). The eruption resulted in 88,000 deaths (Petroeschovsky) acknowledged by Richard B. Stothers and colleagues. However, Tanguy et al. contested this figure, asserting their derivation from unreliable sources and recalculated death based on

Zollinger's work. He estimated 11,000 deaths from the eruption while 49,000 deaths by pandemic diseases and post-eruption starvation (Tanguy et al. 138). Oppenheimer estimated 71,000 fatalities while Reid's assessment calculated 100,000 direct and indirect fatalities in Sumbawa, Bali, and other locations (Reid).

The eruption sparked an eruptive winter which spawned a global climatic anomaly. Global temperatures dropped by 0.53°C in the Northern Hemisphere, posing some vigorous challenges for agriculture (Stothers 1196). Throughout the spring and summer, "dry fog" pervaded the northeastern United States (Skeen). The summer of 1816 was marked by extreme weather and was termed as the "Year Without a Summer." Fog made sunlight appear less brilliant and red diminishing it considerably. Frosts were witnessed on June 4, 1816, over elevated terrains of Maine, Vermont, and northern New York, and snowing began in Dennysville, Maine, and Albany, New York, by

June 6, 1816 (Skeen 55). These conditions continued for nearly three months (56). The eruption halted the Indian monsoon resulting in consecutive three year crop failure, thereby triggering mass hunger and deaths. Meanwhile, a new strain of cholera that surfaced in Bengal in 1816 spread owing to the post eruption climatic shift (Evensen and Peterson 11). In areas like New England and the British Isles, hard climatic conditions brought about huge loss of livestock and crop failure that precipitated famine conditions, as vividly shown in the cases of Wales and parts of Ireland (1816: *The Year*; Oppenheimer). The families in Wales undertook long distances while begging for food. There were massive social disturbances in Europe attributed to the food shortage, illustrated by soaring food prices in Germany and the riots that occurred in several towns throughout Europe outside bakeries and grain exchanges. The year 1816 (*Year Without a Summer*) came to be known as "Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death" or the "Year of Poverty."

Impact on Byron and Shelley

The global environment witnessed freezing temperature, crops failures, floods, a summer-less year (1816), meagre sunlight due to climate change caused by Tambora eruption. Hailstorms, rainstorms, and snowfalls were witnessed in summer months (Post) and the effects lingered for two to three years (Boers 51-53). Tambora eruption impacted the poetic imagination of Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley who experienced the aftermaths while traveling across Europe along with Mary Shelley. Mary Shelley, in her travel narrative *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817) recorded the weather disruption as:

The spring, as the inhabitants informed us, was unusually late, and indeed the cold was excessive; as we ascended the mountains, the same clouds which rained on us in the valleys poured forth large flakes of snow thick and fast. The sun occasionally shone through these showers, and illuminated the magnificent ravines of the mountains, whose gigantic pines were some laden with snow, somewhat round by the lines of scattered and lingering vapour; others darting their dark spires into the sunny sky, brilliantly clear and azure. (Shelley 90)

The aftermath of the eruption instilled a deep sense of environmental pessimism (Sheppard and Sheppard) in

their compositions, casting nature in menacing and unforgiving colors. The pale sunlight and general darkness triggered a motif of darkness under which these poets conceived of a possible death or weakening of the sun, bringing with it extinction of humanity. The extreme violence of global cooling goaded them on to depict ice as not merely a natural phenomenon but rather as a mighty, hostile power potential enough to destroy humankind. This ecological despondency made Byron and Shelley foresee the ecological future as hopelessly dashed, characterized by widespread environmental degradation and an overarching sense of inevitable, catastrophic collapse. Their works therefore reflect pessimism profoundly somber, with nature's punishment for humanity's disturbance signaling an ominous, inexorable trajectory into ecological doom. Shelley's *Letter IV., To T. P. Esq., St. Martin-Servoz-Chamouni-Montan-Vert-Mont-Blanc*. (Shelley 161-62), he articulates a profound sense of environmental pessimism as:

It is agreed by all, that the snow on the summit of Mont Blanc and the neighbouring mountains perpetually augments, and that ice, in the form of glaciers, subsists without melting in the valley of Chamouni during its transient and variable summer. If the snow which produces this glacier must augment, and the heat of the valley is no obstacle to the perpetual existence of such masses of ice as have already descended into it, the consequence is obvious; the glaciers must augment and will subsist, at least until they have overflowed this vale.

I will not pursue Buffon's sublime but gloomy theory—that this globe which we inhabit will at some future period be changed into a mass of frost by the encroachments of the polar ice, and of that produced on the most elevated points of the earth. (Shelley 161-62)

Shelley interprets the intensifying environmental cooling as a harbinger of humanity's eventual decline. In his view, this chilling transformation signals not merely a shift in climate but an existential threat that could lead to the ultimate extinction of human life.

Illustrations

The particle augmentation effects of the Tambora eruption reduced sunlight which influenced the imagery of environmental gloom in Lord Byron's poem "Darkness"

(1816). He profoundly displays the sense of ecological doom and symbolizes the loss of the sunshinewhereby he captures a vision of a world in collapse because natural forces have betrayed humanity. He writes:

The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went-and came, and brought no day.
(Byron 468)

In this stanza, Byron depicts a darkened world in which the sun has gone out, and the stars "wander darkling,"(468) symbolizing a loss of light and natural order. The Earth, "blind" and "icy," is trapped in perpetual darkness and the morning fails to bring the day. This imagery conveys Byron's deep pessimism about the post-Tambora environment, defining nature in complete turmoil. Byron's pessimism intensifies in "Darkness"(1816) as he depicts people burning down homes and cities to generate light. Only those living near volcanoes are shown content, finding comfort in the eruptions that function as torches.

The habitations of all things which dwell,
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consum'd,
And men were gather'd round their blazing homes
To look once more into each other's face. (468)
This juxtaposition throws up a world desperate for light wherein the destruction is a suitable briefly available comfort. Byron creates a similar setting in "The Prisoner of Chillon" (1816) as:
In Chillon's dungeons deep and old,
There are seven columns, massy and grey,
Dim with a dull imprison'd ray,
A sunbeam which hath lost its way. (469)

Describing an oppressive confinement in the stanza, The "dull imprison'd ray" (469) of light represents sunlight trapped and stifled, much like the natural world itself has been constrained by the environmental aftermath of the Tambora eruption. The sunbeam "which hath lost its way" (469) is a powerful metaphor for the diminishing light and vitality that once defined life on Earth, now obscured by the ash and particulate matter in the atmosphere. Byron uses this image to reflect a world where nature itself seems to

be turning against the life, suffocating the planet in an eternal gloom. This stanza mirrors Byron's deep pessimism about the future, where the natural world, once a source of sustenance and inspiration, has become a force of destruction and despair.

Reinterpretation of P. B. Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1817) presents a scenario where the poet questions the disappearance of the "Spirit of Beauty," which metaphorically translates to the sun. The poet's question, "Where art thou gone?" becomes a question over sunlight; for it represents the essence of all natural beauty.

Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate
With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon
Of human thought or form, where art thou gone?
Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?
Ask why the sunlight not for ever
Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain-river.
(Shelley 346)

Use of the adjective word "dim" to describe the darkness in the poet's state, coupled with the question of sunshine incessantly unable to create rainbows, further underlines the metaphorical lamenting of an environmental obscurity. In the context of historical climatology, the poem bespeaks another allusion towards the gloom hurled on the sun. "Why fear and dream and death and birth / cast on the daylight of this earth / Such gloom, why man has such a scope" (Shelley 346) is the last line of the stanza in this regard and is metaphorically representative of the climatic conditions of 1816.

The severe and cold climatic conditions triggered by the massive emission of elemental toxins and particulate matter from the Tambora eruption (1815) contributed to the increase in eco-dystopian pessimism that appears in Byron's and Shelley's works. The two poets sensed the frigid temperature and snow as hostile forces against the existence of humans. Through the voice of the Second Spirit in *Manfred* (1817), Byron expresses his environmental pessimism by asserting that the ice is a destructive force that will eventually put an end to humanity. Mont Blanc is viewed by him as the "Monarch of Mountains," sitting atop the throne of rocks, with the clouds serving as its cloak. Byron writes about Mont Blanc as:

The Avalanche in his hand –
 But ere it fall, that thundering ball
 Must pause for my command.
 The Glacier's cold and restless mass
 Moves onward day by day,
 But I am he who bids it pass,
 Or with its ice delay. (Byron 480)

The spirit claims that avalanches, which are like thunderous balls, are at its disposal and that the crown of Mont Blanc is made of snow. The glacier, according to spirit, is restless and advancing relentlessly to obliterate humankind. This section portrays Byron's environmental pessimism where he seems sure of the glacial end of the world. His composition of "Prometheus" (1816) during the year without summer (1816) itself makes a clear allusion to the global cooling that was noticed following the Mount Tambora's eruption (1815) and made him an ecodoom pessimist. The severity of his pessimism is reflected through the character of Prometheus in the poem when Byron lauds the act as insignificant as stealing fire: "Thy Godlike crime was to be kind," which emphasizes the need for a stable climate that Byron desired.

Along with the personal reflection on this impact as in his Letter IV (Shelley 161–62) where he moans that frost might yet seize the whole earth to destroy human life, P. B. Shelley In "Mont Blanc" (1817), compares glaciers with snakes who watch their victims (humans) from a distance. Shelley regards glacier architecture as a "City of Death" made of ice that has been stacked high, impenetrable, and full of contempt for the human world:

Teach the adverting mind. The glaciers creep
 Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far
 fountains,
 Slow rolling on; there, many a precipice
 Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power
 Have pill'd: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,
 A city of death, distinct with many a tower
 And wall impregnable of beaming ice. (Shelley 349)

This stanza reflects Shelley's environmental pessimism, emphasizing nature's overwhelming and destructive power. The glaciers, creeping "like snakes that watch their prey," (349) suggest an inevitable, predatory

force, indifferent to human existence. The imagery of "frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power" highlights nature's mockery of human attempts at control, creating impenetrable barriers. The "city" of ice, with its "dome, pyramid, and pinnacle," suggests an inhospitable world, where natural forces are hostile and unyielding, offering no refuge or hope for humanity in the face of environmental collapse.

Conclusion

The eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 had a profound impact on the thought processes of Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley in regard to nature and human weakness. Catastrophic alteration of weather conditions befell the poets during their travels across Europe, which also affected their creative work dramatically. Drifting away from the Romantic view of the natural world which, in turn, was perceived to be a refuge and inspiration, both poets began to see nature itself as a possible agent of destruction in very epic proportions. This shift reflects a deep-seated environmental pessimism in their poetry, suggesting that they viewed nature as an unpredictable and potentially annihilative power, rather than as a nurturing force. Their pessimistic outlook, a direct consequence of witnessing the Tambora aftermath, underscores a darker, cautionary view of humanity's precarious place within the natural world, one that foreshadows modern eco-anxiety.

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