

Pre-Industrial Climate Anxiety: Environmental Uncertainty in British Romantic Poetry

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Abstract:

British Romantic poetry has traditionally been studied through the lens of natural beauty, artistic creation and rural harmony. Moreover, such readings imply that nature is the source of consolation, aesthetic pleasure, and moral principles. However, this paper encapsulates themes of fear, storm, decay, and environmental instability, while also revealing an early form of climate anxiety rooted in pre-industrial concerns about Nature—an aspect that remains largely unexplored. This study surveys Romantic poetry to explore how poets of the era reacted to abnormal weather, environmental transformations in rural landscapes, and social uncertainties, all of which are articulated through a shared sense of ecological unease. The present paper also employs climate anxiety theory and cultural materialism as its core theoretical frameworks. This study moves beyond conventional pastoral interpretations by recovering marginalized ecological voices and examining how atmospheric disorder, silence, decay, and fear function as expressions of a proto-form of climate anxiety.

Keywords: Climate anxiety, Romantic poetry, Romantic ecocriticism, Weather trauma, Ecological melancholy.

Research Questions:

1. How do the British Romantic poets represent the uncertain weather, storm and environmental abnormality in their poetry?
2. What is the pathway of relating the Romantic ecological anxiety to modern climate anxiety?
3. Why do the Romantic poets use silence, decay, and ruined pictures to vent out the existential anxiety?

Research Methods: This research paper adopts a qualitative method and interdisciplinary approach. Close textual analysis is employed within a cultural materialist and economic framework. An Inductive method is employed to study the recurring shifts of environmental uncertainty.

Introduction:

British Romantic poetry has traditionally been studied in terms of the beauty of nature, the power of imagination, and the expression of the artist's creative freedom. Symbolic elements such as Wordsworth's mountains, Keats' autumn, and Shelley's air have been interpreted as representations of a harmonious pastoral ideal in literary critical domains. In this context, Romantic nature is portrayed as a harmonious and tranquil force that brings peace and offers moral guidance to humanity. However, the themes of deep anxiety, uncertainty, and environmental fear have long been overlooked in scholarly discussions. The purpose of this paper is to study the Romantic Age innovatively, examining it through the lens of contemporary climate anxiety while avoiding anachronism. Climate anxiety here does not refer to the direct application of modern scientific discourse; rather, it indicates a proto-form of environmental

fear that emerged during the Industrial Revolution, amid pre-modern climatic instability. The Romantic poets were producing artistic works during a period of profound uncertainty, when the regular cycle of the seasons no longer felt reliable and rapid industrial growth was transforming nature into an unstable and threatening space. That is why the relationship between human beings and nature became too fragile to bear and entirely unpredictable. These reflect a lived historical reality that formed both the imagination and the anxieties of the said age.

By exploring representations of abnormal weather, silence, decay, and disrupted natural cycles, this study argues that Romantic poetry presciently engages with the central concerns of contemporary climate discourse. Furthermore, it repositions the Romantic Literature as an early record of ecological anxiety. This paper attempts to rethink British Romantic poetry not as a literary retreat but as a site or response to environmental uncertainty.

Environmental Instability and the Romantic Moment:

From 1798 to 1837, a period of profound literary transformation coincided with significant environmental instability. The Industrial Revolution not only transformed work and society but also provoked a profound conflict between humanity and nature. Smoke-filled skies, coal-driven factories, widespread deforestation, and the enclosure movement collectively disrupted both the physical environment and the cultural fabric of rural England. The volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 caused drastic climate changes, and 1816 became known in history as the 'Year Without a Summer.' The uneven winters, crop failures, and food crises profoundly influenced the Romantic poets' lives and the depth of their imagination. Still, it is surprising that Romantic ecocriticism has, for a long time, failed to place this climate-related fear at the centre of its critical Inquiry. As David M. Higgins observes, Romantic poets were acutely aware of living within climactic confrontation that no longer appeared as stable (Higgins).

This paper argues that the environmental instability was not peripheral but central to Romantic imagination and experiences.

Defining Climate Anxiety: A Literary Approach:

In this study, 'the climate anxiety' is not understood as psychological trauma but as a cultural emotion. Cultural emotion is a mental state in which human beings cannot see nature as stable, reliable, or sustaining. In Romantic poetry, such anxiety is expressed through images of polluted weather, nature's prolonged silence, or violence, often depicted in scenes of death, decay, and dissolution. These are not only aesthetic choices but reflections of a deeper historical anxiety. Thus, climate anxiety functions as an interpretive framework that allows one to study Romantic poetry not as a pastoral harmony but as a response to environmental instability.

Romanticism Beyond Pastoral Idealism:

Romantic poetry had long been regarded as a pastoral tradition, with nature symbolizing peace, shelter, or moral perfection. However, this concept had become the base of consideration of the Romantic exposure but the present paper shows that Romantic nature does not always mean tranquillity or a state of consolation. William Wordsworth's nature is often pure, silent, indifferent and at times even terrifying. Coleridge's natural world functions as a moral disciplinarian, inflicting ethical punishment. Shelly's nature embodies destruction and revolution.

This is not pastoral poetry; rather, it is unstable, unpredictable, and even threatening. A pastoral reading constructs Romantic poetry as secure and harmonious, yet such stability is incompatible with historical reality.

From Pastoral Balance to Environmental Unease:

Romantic poetry frequently articulates a dialectical relationship between human subjectivity and the natural world. From this tense and often unstable encounter arises a profound sense of anxiety, signalling a shift in which nature is no longer conceived as a mere reflection of human perception but as an autonomous force that exceeds human understanding and control. This perspective aligns Romantic poetry with ultramodern climate literature, exposing an early consciousness of environmental instability, uncertainty, and vulnerability.

Romantic Ecocriticism:

Modern Romantic ecocriticism has largely coalesced around three dominant perspectives: nature appreciation, pastoral idealism, and ecological harmony. While these approaches have been instrumental in foregrounding Romantic literature's environmental consciousness, they also reveal certain critical limitations. An emphasis on aesthetic reverence for nature often privileges celebratory and affirmative readings, marginalizing representations of conflict, exploitation, and ecological anxiety. Similarly, pastoral idealism tends to construct a nostalgic vision of rural harmony that obscures historical realities such as enclosure, labour, and environmental degradation. The focus on ecological harmony further risks smoothing over tensions between human and nonhuman worlds, presenting nature as a stable, reconciled entity rather than a dynamic and contested space. Consequently, these dominant trends produce critical silences around issues of power, materiality, and environmental injustice. A more nuanced eco-critical framework would therefore attend not only to Romanticism's idealizations of nature but also to its fractures, ambivalences, and unresolved ecological contradictions. However, the issues like climate fear, environmental uncertainty and weather trauma are left untouched still today. This study is to fill the gaps and fissures and to find a newer exposure.

Storm, Weather and Environmental Disorder:

In Romantic poetry, weather is not merely a descriptive subject but emerges as an active, often antagonistic force that shapes human experience and emotional response. The subjects like storm, air, uneven winter, darkness —are all exposed in romantic poetry and that makes the human existence in question. This paper explores how Romantic poets convey deep environmental anxiety through images of restless weather. In Wordsworth's poetry, the weather is almost uncertain. His mountains, rivers, and skies may support human emotion, but they are not subject to human control. Nature's unpredictability does not provide shelter for humans but it reminds them of their own smallness. Moreover, this experience creates fear, awe, and existential unease. In Coleridge, this uneasiness is extreme. If we look in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, we find that natural law is disrupted, the air becomes unmovable, the sun gets hotter unnaturally, water is everywhere but not for drinking.

This environment of naturalness is not only the symbol of moral transgressions, but, rather it delineates a fractured nature where the relationship between the natural world and human life is no longer mutually sustaining. Thus, weather emerges as a source of uncertainty that reminds human beings of their inherent fragility.

Storm as Anxiety, Not of Sublime:

Traditional Romantic criticism explains the storm as a sublime experience—namely, a combination of human fear and mystery. In Shelly's Ode to the West Wind, the air is the creator as well as the destroyer. The air moves the dry leaves and keeps a promise to regenerate a new life. This quality is not truly about safety but about uncertainty. Shelley recognizes that change does not automatically lead to liberation; rather, it often generates unforeseen remnants and disruptions. It is this instability—where transformation promises progress yet risks loss—that becomes the very ground of anxiety, as the future remains contingent and resistant to moral or

political certainty. Here, Nature does not meet the moral balance. It is only continuous and uneasy and beyond human will.

The ‘Year Without a Summer’ and Poetic Imagination:

The imbalanced weather in 1816 moves the romantic imagination. The imbalanced weather of 1816, often called the Year Without a Summer, profoundly shaped the Romantic imagination. Caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora, the abnormal cold, persistent rain, and crop failures disrupted ordinary relations between humans and nature, compelling Romantic writers to confront environmental instability. This climatic crisis intensified Romantic preoccupations with ruin, sublimity, and existential uncertainty, transforming nature from a benign moral guide into a force of estrangement and menace. The darkened skies and failed seasons found imaginative expression in works such as Lord Byron’s apocalyptic poem “Darkness” and the Gothic atmosphere surrounding the creation of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. Thus, the climatic imbalance of 1816 did not merely form a historical backdrop but actively reshaped Romantic thought, deepening its engagement with vulnerability, loss, and, the precariousness of human existence within a disturbed natural world. The images found in Coleridge and Shelley are not only the fruits of imagination but rather the reflection of lived environmental trauma.

This paper argues that the description of the romantic weather bears a collective environmental memory—that is the prefix of the modern climate literature.

Decay, Loss and Ecological Melancholy:

Decay is a central motif in Romantic poetry, referring not only to the transience of human life but also to signs of environmental degradation. Here, nature does not guarantee sustainability. In Keats’ poems, this melancholic ecology is particularly noticeable. In ‘Ode to the Nightingale’, nature is no longer a shelter but rather a companion to the death-conscious.

Flowers bloom, but the poet knows the beauty will fade away soon. Nature's such uncertain existence creates a deeper melancholic environment. It is certain that if we look into 'To Autumn', it has been studied as a poem of perfection or tranquillity.

However, this study shows that the underlying tone is, in fact, a farewell song. Autumn means exploring the end. Nature is often understood as operating through cycles of decay and renewal, suggesting the possibility of restoration over time. In this context, however, such cyclical return is conspicuously absent. The expected rhythm of regeneration fails to materialise, disrupting the conventional association between nature and continuity. This absence not only unsettles ecological expectations but also signals a deeper rupture, where nature no longer functions as a self-correcting system. Instead, the broken cycle points to loss, irreversibility, and the erosion of harmony between natural processes and human experience.

Ruins, Silence and Environmental Loss:

In Wordsworth's poetry, ruins play an important role. Deformity, deserted villages, and silent nature are all marks of the shared decay of both nature and humanity. In other words, nature no longer functions as a life-giving force. Instead, it assumes the role of a silent witness to human and ecological decline. This silence is not empty or passive; rather, it carries profound meaning. It reflects loss, exhaustion, and the breakdown of the reciprocal relationship between humanity and the natural world. By withdrawing its regenerative voice, nature exposes the consequences of neglect and exploitation, making its silence a powerful form of testimony. It is not the silence of peace but rather the silence of absence. The environment does not speak a single word, but such silence creates anxiety or trauma.

Ecological Melancholy as Cultural Emotion:

The present paper shows that romantic melancholy is not only a personal mental state. It is a cultural ecological emotion that is intimately associated with the environmental decay,

uncertain future and the restlessness of nature. Although the Romantic poets did not know the term 'climate change,' they sensed that nature was changing and that its cycles were breaking down. Human beings are decentralised and from their realisation emerges the concept 'ecological melancholy' that becomes the precursor to modern climate grief. John Clare and Ecological Trauma: John Clare was marginal in the context of the discussion of Romantic ideals. Where aestheticized nature prevails in the poetry of William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, nature in the poetry of John Clare is insipid, flavourless, tormented, and painful. Here, it argues that John Clare is the true ecological trauma witness of romanticism. In Clare's poetry, Nature is a shelter of romanticism but a constantly fading reality. The Enclosure Movement in England transformed rural life and the English fields, woods, and mountains, exerting a direct impact on every aspect of the natural and social environment. John Clare is not merely an observer of environmental and social change but also one of its most profound sufferers. Unlike many Romantic poets who contemplate nature from a distance, Clare writes from within the lived reality of rural dispossession. The transformations brought about by enclosure—the loss of common land, disrupted ecosystems, and fractured rural communities—are experienced in his poetry as personal trauma rather than abstract observation. His poems register pain, displacement, and ecological grief, revealing how environmental degradation is inseparable from human suffering. In this sense, Clare's work bears witness to nature not as an aesthetic object but as a wounded presence, mirroring the poet's own sense of alienation and loss.

Decentring the Human: Romantic Poetry and the Crisis of Anthropocentrism:

Romantic poetry often foregrounds human emotion, imagination, and subjective experience. However, when examined through the lens of pre-industrial climate anxiety, these texts explore a growing discomfort with human centralisation. Nature is not consistently formed or shaped by human emotion; rather, it frequently resists interpretation and control. This resistance

generates a form of anxiety rooted in the realisation that human agency is limited in the face of environmental instability.

It is true that in many Romantic poems, natural forces appear passive or indifferent to human desire or moral intention. Storms arrive without ethical justification, landscapes change without any warning, and weather patterns operate independently of human wills. Such representations challenge the Enlightenment faith in human mastery over Nature and the ideal of linear progress achieved through reason. Instead of portraying Nature as a controllable and rational system, Romantic poetry presents it as unstable, autonomous, and resistant to human dominance. This shift exposes the limitations of Enlightenment rationalism and reveals a growing awareness of environmental uncertainty, where Nature no longer serves merely as a backdrop for human advancement but emerges as a force that unsettles the very notion of progress. As David M. Higgins notes, Romantic writers were increasingly conscious of living within climatic systems that could not be predicted or governed (Higgins). This awareness destabilises anthropocentrism and generates an early form of ecological uncertainty or anxiety.

Despite imagining the natural world as arranged around human presence, Romantic poetry often portrays it as explored, fragile, and very marginal. This shift is crucial for understanding Romantic climate anxiety as a response not only to environmental change but also to the decay of human dominance. This kind of anxiety emerges from the unsettling recognition that nature does not exist for human comfort and consolation.

Temporal Uncertainty and the Breakdown of Seasonal Faith:

A crucial yet underexplored aspect of Romantic climate anxiety exists in the poets' troubled rapport with time. It is obvious that traditional agrarian culture depended on the reliability of seasonal cycles, but Romantic poetry increasingly reflects doubts about this stability and

continuity. Seasons no longer guarantee renewal; instead, they appear delayed, fractured, distorted, or ominously suspended.

This anxiety or uncertainty gives rise to what may be described as temporal anxiety. Romantic poems frequently dwell on moments of transition—twilight, late autumn, fading light—indicating an inability to imagine stable or fruitful futures. The uncertainty does not stem from a sudden catastrophe but from prolonged unpredictability. Failed harvests, uneven winters, and irregular weather patterns undermine confidence in nature's cyclical arrangement.

As scholars have noted, the period following the Tambora eruption intensified such anxieties across Europe (Higgins). Romantic poets respond not by documenting the climate scientifically but by registering its emotional results. Time itself becomes fragile or unstable, and with it, the expectation of regeneration. This fitful natural temporality contributes to a broader sense of ecological discomfort that anticipates modern climate anxiety.

Landscape as Evidence: Nature Bearing the Marks of Change:

Romantic landscapes are often interpreted symbolically; however, they also function as material documents that record processes of environmental transformation. Birds, hills, rivers, forests, and ruins in Romantic poetry frequently carry out the Signs of disruption rather than timeless beauty. Such landscapes do not simply mirror deeper feelings; they carry the imprint of historical and ecological changes.

The recapitulation of abandoned villages, eroded land, and silent fields suggests that Romantic writers and critics no longer imagine nature as untouched or eternal. Instead, it becomes a witness to environmental alteration. James C. McKusick observes that Romantic writers were acutely conscious of the ways industrial and agricultural practices were reshaping not only the physical landscape but also human modes of perception (Green Writing). For these writers, environmental change was inseparable from cultural and psychological transformation:

alterations to land use, enclosure, and mechanized production disrupted traditional relationships between humans and nature. Romantic literature therefore registers an early ecological awareness, revealing how material interventions in the environment produce shifts in sensibility, imagination, and ethical responsibility. Rather than presenting nature as a stable or idealized backdrop, Romantic writers depict it as a contested space marked by loss, alienation, and emerging environmental anxiety. The land itself appears altered, scarred, and resistant to idealisation.

By studying landscapes as historically pointed spaces, Romantic poetry challenges pastoral nostalgia. Nature is no longer external to history; rather, it is embedded within historical processes. This phenomenon reinforces the argument that Romantic texts encode early forms of environmental awareness by articulating climate-related anxiety through concrete, material, and spatial imagery rather than abstract theoretical frameworks. Romantic poets respond to environmental instability not by formulating systematic ecological doctrines, but by representing disturbed landscapes, erratic weather, and altered sensory experiences. Such imagery allows environmental change to be felt rather than merely conceptualized, embedding ecological unease within everyday encounters with land, weather, and place. In this way, Romantic literature anticipates modern climate consciousness by translating environmental disruption into lived, perceptible experience rather than detached speculation.

Weather as Experience: Emotional Responses to Climatic Exposure:

If we look at the Romantic poetry, weather frequently functions as an experiential symbol rather than a decorative ingredient. Fitful gusts, frost, darkness, and oppressive stillness can shape emotional states physically. Rather than operating as metaphors for inner feelings, these atmospheric conditions produce anxiety through bodily exposure. Romantic subjects often appear as emotionally vulnerable because they are environmentally vulnerable. Prolonged cold

provokes melancholy, violent storms provoke fear, and unnatural stillness creates discomfort or unease. This intense relationship between emotion and climate defines an embodied awareness of environmental instability or anxiety. As Anne Collett and Olivia Murphy argue, Romantic literature often reflects lived climatic experience rather than abstract natural philosophy (Romantic Climates).

Such affective responses reveal that climate anxiety is not connected solely to intellectual reflection but is also deeply sensory in nature. The Romantic subject feels the climate before understanding it. This anticipates modern studies within environmental humanities that link climate change to personal via emotional and psychological distress, demonstrating that such experiences have deeper historical structures.

Silence as Ecological Disturbance:

In Romantic poetry, silence plays a crucial role and is conventionally linked to contemplation and spiritual tranquillity. Silence in Romantic poetry has traditionally been associated with contemplation and spiritual tranquillity. However, within the context of climate anxiety, silence no longer signifies calm; instead, it suggests ecological disruption, disturbance, and the unsettling absence of natural rhythms, marking a shift from harmonious nature to an environment marked by fragility and loss. The absence of birdsong, motionless air, and quiet landscapes indicates suspension rather than comfort, beauty or peace.

Sometimes this silence becomes unsettling because it interrupts expectations of vitality. Nature appears unmoved, emptied, or withdrawn. Such moments produce anxiety perfectly because they defy familiar sensory roots. The environment does not reassure, but it withholds responses. Reading 'silence' as a climactic symptom avails for a deeper understanding of Romantic environmental consciousness. Silence becomes an indicator of imbalance, foreshadowing modern anxieties about extinction and ecological loss. Rather than aesthetic stillness, silence

comes to symbolise absence, fragility, and unpredictability. In this context, it marks the breakdown of familiar natural rhythms and gestures toward an environment rendered unstable and vulnerable. Silence thus functions not as a space of spiritual repose but as an affective sign of ecological disturbance and loss.

Witnessing without Consolation: An Ethical Position:

Romantic poets often adopt the role of witnesses rather than interpreters or moral guides. They feel environmental change without offering resolution or reassurance. This refusal to console distinguishes Romantic climate anxiety from pastoral optimism. Silence thus witnesses and acknowledges loss without restoring the thread of harmony. Rather than offering consolation or resolution, it remains suspended, registering ecological damage while refusing the reassurance of balance or renewal. In this way, silence becomes an ethical and affective mode of attention, compelling the reader to confront environmental fragility without the comfort of aesthetic closure. The poets record environmental instability, loss, decay, and uncertainty without transforming them into cured narratives. This ethical insight reflects an awareness that certain forms of damage are irreversible. Such poetic witnessing aligns with contemporary environmental literature that forces bearing witness over proposing resolutions. That is how Romantic poetry models an early form of ecological responsibility grounded in attentiveness and honesty.

Climate Anxiety as Cultural Memory:

Romantic poetry may be understood as a repository of cultural memory intimately associated with environmental instability. The persistent return of gusts, storms, ruins, silence, darkness, and decay throughout Romantic texts suggests that climate anxiety is woven into Romantic aesthetic ideology, allowing environmental unease to endure in poetic form. These visions reappear in modern climate literature, assuring a continuity of environmental phobia. As

scholars within environmental humanities suggest, literature plays a dominant role in shaping how societies remember ecological crisis (Johns-Putra). Romantic poetry contributes to this memory by encoding anxiety within structural narrative and imagery. Climate anxiety, therefore, is not a purely modern condition but a historically transmitted emotional exposure. The present study reinforces its relevance to contemporary climate discourse and demonstrates the deep historical roots of ecological uncertainty or unease.

Enclosure and Environmental Violence:

The Enclosure Movement has largely been analysed in economic or social terms, but this research paper examines it as a form of environmental violence. In John Clare's poetry, the closed pathways, the lost nest of the birds, the unnatural seasons—are frequently observed.

These are all the direct footprints of the ecological loss. Climate anxiety is an abstract idea. It is a lived experience.

Nature as a Site of Trauma:

John Clare's nature is not silent, but it is severely wounded. The changing colours of the sky, the tree falling—all of these create a tone of trauma in his work. It is important to note that Clare connects it to modern climate literature. His poems reveal that climate anxiety was not only a threat looming over the future but also a condition experienced in the past. Romantic Anxiety and Modern Climate Fear: Establishing a conceptual continuity between the Romantic Age and the twenty- first century is the aim of this point.

The Romantic poets were not aware of the scientific language of climate change, however, they felt the unpredictability of nature, the uncertainty about the future and the grim decline of anthropocentrism.

From Poetic Anxiety to Psychological Term:

Today, Climate anxiety is a psychological term. But in the Romantic Age, it was a cultural emotion. Fear unfolds through images of creeping darkness, oppressive silence, raging storms, and relentless decay. Here, the Romantic Imagination serves as a strategy for confrontation.

Why Romantic Poetry is Relevant Today:

The research paper argues that romantic poetry is relevant and fruitful. There are some reasons—it shows that anxiety is not a new factor, the environmental fear has always been an integral part of human history. It centralises the literature in climate discourse. Romantic poetry teaches not to deny the fear but rather to give language to fear.

Conclusion:

This paper has argued that British Romantic poetry does not simply celebrate natural ecstasy; rather, it serves as a document of profound pre-industrial climate anxiety. Romantic poetry alone cannot fully account for the concept of pastoral harmony. This paper challenges conventional Romantic criticism by moving beyond the familiar focus on pastoral harmony and the central themes of uncertainty, anxiety, and darkness. Crucially, the paper demonstrates that modern climate anxiety is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is deeply rooted in the environmental consciousness and experiences of the Romantic era. This reading repositions British Romantic poetry within contemporary environmental discourse, exploring its relevance to ongoing debates around ecological instability or climate anxiety.

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