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Anthropocene Horror as the Dark Legacy of Romantic Anti-Industrialism

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Abstract

The advent of the Anthropocene, the era of human impact on climate and the environment being the prevailing factor, has led to the establishment of a new cultural and literary awareness in a state of apprehension, fear, and existential sorrow. This article explores how contemporary expressions of "Anthropocene horror"—a genre characterized by ecological fear and the uncanny return of nature as threat—can be traced back to the Romantic critique of industrial modernity. Romantic anti-industrialism, especially as practised by Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley, is not confined to mere nostalgia and pastoralism: it is less a direct attack upon mechanistic rationality, materialism and burning of coal than an implicit philosophical protest against these things. Placing Romantic literature in the historic context of the rise of the Industrial Revolution, this work exposes the progression of the initial anxieties concerning the dehumanization of nature into the realisation of the ecological horror that is characteristic of the Anthropocene period. Applying the ecocritical theory and close reading, the article constructs parallels between Romantic idealism and climate fiction that we are experiencing at the moment, correlating the sublime that revolves around spirituality of old to the horror of inescapable environmental destruction.

*This paper will use case studies of such authors as Blake and his descriptions of the "Dark Satanic mills" and Jeff VanderMeer in his book *Annihilation* and Atwood and her dystopic vision in *Oryx and Crake*,*

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that Anthropocene horror is becoming the dystopian echo of the Romantic dreams, what this world we dreamt of as divine shelter is now becoming and is again, the horror story, the monster force driven by human excess. Finally, as the article shows, literary history is not only reflective but prophetic, a dark legacy Romantic anti-industrialism being a critical lens through which to interpret the affective features of our ecological crisis as it now is today.

Key Words: *Anthropocene Horror; Romanticism; Anti-Industrialism; Eco-Criticism; Nature*

Introduction

The Anthropocene is a concept introduced by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to describe a new, human-influenced geological time period where people are the most crucial factor in the climate and ecosystem of the Earth (Crutzen and Stoermer 17). Whereas the scientific meaning of the Anthropocene focuses on carbon emissions, loss of biodiversity, and massive changes to the planet, its cultural cost coming in the name of Anthropocene horror, i.e., human disregard and overuse, has supported the narrative of haunted, decaying earth, instead of the image of a planet that humans have created as a home. Such format of horror is not a novel occurrence. The title can be in many respects regarded as the realization of prophetic fears raised more than two centuries ago in the Romantic era. Romanticism, which flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was shaped by the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment's mechanistic worldview. Those who fought the utilitarian and scientific rationalism that justified wild industrial development included writers such as William Wordsworth, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was succeeded by Mary Shelley. They provided an opposite picture of nature as an animated, spiritual, and godlike being that reason, and instead, needs to be respected over being used (Bate, *Romantic Ecology* 1215). Probably the most famous poetical denunciation of industrial pollution is the allusion (in Milton (1804) to “Dark Satanic Mills” made by William Blake (1804). His mystical cosmology deplored how reason, materialism, and machinery had enslaved the human spirit. Likewise, Wordsworth was preoccupied with the destruction of the rural and the balance of nature as a result of the growth

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of industry in his nature poetry, notably in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and *The Prelude* (1850). In his 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth wrote of his intent to draw attention to "the essential passions of the heart... in a state of simplicity" that had been corrupted by modernity (Wordsworth and Coleridge 595). In their attempt to restore natural things to the power of enchantment, the Romantics also contributed to future literary reactions to environmental catastrophe, which sheds light upon New England destruction. As Jonathan Bate asserts, Romanticism was "a literature of reaction"—one that sought to restore value to the nonhuman world as a response to the Enlightenment's disenchantment and the industrial commodification of nature (*The Song of the Earth* 57).

The Romantic interest over the relationship between man and nature, which was approached in earlier times with an idealist and spiritual perspective and even a sort of spiritual yearning, has transformed itself into a literature of doom and failure in the twenty-first century. The climate crisis, massive deforestation, microplastic pollution, the sixth mass extinction are not abstract scenarios anymore, they are evident and quantifiable along with being irreparable (Steffen et al. 837).

This fear was replicated in the cli-fi and ecological horror stories of today which reveal the same fears held by the Romantics except that the fear is no longer one of imminent peril, but of permanent loss. Recent literature like *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood (2003) or *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer (2014) depicts a world, in which nature itself seemed to have become unnatural and horrific. The landscapes that were once divine works of Romantic imagination have devolved into mutated zones, laden with bio-technology, toxins and disorder—all nuances that Romantic generation feared would be produced by the unbridled technological advancement but without the spiritual optimism. Frederick Buell contends that such a change in ecological consciousness in the last one hundred years has produced what has sometimes been referred to as an "apocalyptic realism" in literature a process of coming to terms with the fact that the environmental emergency is no longer a metaphor, but is, literally, in the fabric of everyday life (Buell 4). What used to be sublime becomes the grotesque, what had been a

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plunging into nature becomes an experience of its uncanny degradation. Mark Fisher, in his theorization of the "weird and eerie," argues that horror emerges not from what is outside nature but from the collapse of boundaries between the natural and the unnatural, especially when the environment becomes unrecognizable due to anthropogenic interference (Fisher 15).

In this article, the author suggests that Anthropocene horror is not a postmodern creation but, on the contrary, the morbid harvest of the anti-industrial ideas of Romanticism. Approaching Romantic texts side by side with eco-horror and cli-fi writing from today, this paper shows a literary tradition stretching between religious existential crisis of the early nineteenth century and ecological terror of our time. In this sense, literature can be defined as a historical witness and a cultural seismograph, which preserves the dynamic lines of relations between humans and nature in a historical perspective.

Objectives

- To examine how Romantic anti-industrial thought critiques the early industrial revolution.
- To explore the thematic transition from Romantic reverence for nature to Anthropocene horror.
- To analyse select literary texts that portray ecological ruin and industrial alienation.
- To connect Romantic ideals to contemporary climate fiction and eco-horror narratives.
- To highlight the role of literature in shaping environmental consciousness and anxiety.

Methodology

This article employs an interdisciplinary qualitative research method combining:

- **Close textual analysis** of Romantic poetry and contemporary climate fiction.
- **Historical contextualization** to situate Romanticism within the socio-political context of the Industrial Revolution.
- **Ecocritical theory** to analyse how literature reflects and shapes ecological attitudes.

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- **Comparative literary study** to trace thematic continuities between Romanticism and Anthropocene horror fiction.

Romanticism and Anti-Industrialism

Romanticism was a cultural and intellectual movement that arose in Europe towards the end of the 18th and the early 19th century as a response to the Enlightenment ideology of rationalism, empiricism and modernity. It increased during the Industrial Revolution-a time where there was fast pace of mechanization, urbanization and expansion of capitalists. Liberated by the deplorable effects of industrial progress, writers and artists of the Romantic Movement provided an alternative aesthetic that drew on imagination, feelings, the sacrosanctity of nature, and the liberty of being human. This anti-industrial impulse was not merely sentimental, but profoundly philosophical and political, and one that made more central emphasis on the spiritual and ecological cost of industrial modernity.

Historical Context: Reaction against Mechanization

The Industrial Revolution ruthlessly transformed the British countryside: The forests were cleared out and the factories put up instead, the villages swallowed up by the cities, the rhythm of the nature replaced with the clockwork of the machines and, the clocks. Such changes were not taken unnoticed. One of the first to record that intense feeling of loss was a loss of tradition, community, and harmony with nature by romantic writers. As E. P. Thompson notes in *The Making of the English Working Class*, the rise of industrial capitalism involved not just economic change but a cultural revolution in time, discipline, and perception, all of which Romantics opposed (Thompson 56).

The industrial city was the place of spiritual imprisonment as pictured by William Blake. In his poem *London* (1794), he captures the psychic toll of industrial urbanization through haunting imagery: “Marks of weakness, marks of woe,” and “the mind-forg’d manacles I hear.” These metaphors suggest that industrial society not only enslaves bodies but conditions the mind to

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accept alienation and suffering (Blake 24). His reference to “dark satanic mills” in Milton (1804) remains an enduring image of the destructive, soul-crushing power of industry.

Wordsworth’s Rural Idealism and Nature Worship

Industrialism prompted the poetics of rustic plainness and union with nature, which was a strong response by William Wordsworth. In *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798) he contemplates how the wild beauty of nature recovers the self as the noise of modernity mounts:

“The still, sad music of humanity”

(Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, line 91)

This music is the complete opposite of the industrial sounding of cities. According to Jonathan Bate, Wordsworth's work was not mere escapism but a deliberate act of environmental imagination that challenged the extractive logic of industrial capitalism (*Romantic Ecology* 43). Wordsworth viewed the city as a place which was overloaded with senses and corruption. In *The Prelude*, he paints pictures of London as a large group full of “turmoil, and strife.” His idyllic nostalgia of life in the country and contempt of ugliness and disorder in the city indicate a feeling that nature un-mechanized was necessary to the human morality and spiritual life.

Percy Bysshe Shelley and Utopian Anti-Industrialism

Another main representative of Romanticism, Percy Bysshe Shelley, expressed an anti-industrial and a radical anti-authoritarian vision of the world. In *Queen Mab* (1813), Shelley dreams of a society emancipated from monarchies, war, and economic oppression—achievements he links to a return to harmony with nature:

“Man / has gazed upon the ruin he has wrought” (Shelley, *Queen Mab*, Canto III)

Shelley also responded positively to Rousseau, but also to the early socialists, worried about the dehumanising effects of industrial labour and the urban poverty. In his essay *A Defence of*

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Poetry (1821), he writes that poetry “awakens and enlarges the mind,” a function directly at odds with the repetitive, spirit-numbing operations of mechanized industry (Shelley 696). As Anne Janowitz notes, Shelley’s ecological vision was not just aesthetic but political, aligning with revolutionary hopes that human society could be reorganized along natural and just lines (*Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* 112).

The Spiritual vs. the Mechanical: Romantic Ontology

Romanticism assumed the spiritual ontology- a perception of nature as a breathing, living force with mystery and divinity in it. This is a stark contrast to the enlightenment and industrial sense of nature as an object where nature can be worked on and manipulated. The idea of the One Life as Coleridge developed in such poems as *The Eolian Harp* would be another episode in the denaturalization that Coleridge articulates in the concept of the “One Life” as leading to the responsibility of humans to nature. As philosopher Herbert Marcuse argued, the Romantic protest against industrial society preserved the possibility of “a different, non-repressive civilization” that viewed nature not as an object but as a co-participant in life (*One-Dimensional Man* 64).

Romantic Anti-Industrialism as Ecological Forewarning

Concerns of modern ecological discourse As much as they are usually dismissed as idealistic or retrogressive, romantics saw their anti-industrialism as presaging numerous concerns of modern ecological discourse. According to Kate Rigby, Romanticism marked the beginning of a shift “from seeing nature as background to seeing it as protagonist” (*Topographies of the Sacred* 13). The Romantics' fear of technological alienation now resonates in a world facing climate collapse, biodiversity loss, and technological domination.

Even in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818)—often classified as Gothic or proto-science fiction—the anti-industrial theme is strong. Victor Frankenstein is obsessed with technological creation that has nothing to do with ethics responsibility and ecological awareness, but creates

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disaster. As James McKusick notes, *Frankenstein* is a cautionary tale about “the Enlightenment dream of domination over nature” (*Green Writing* 110).

- **Romantic Sublime vs. Anthropocene Sublime**

Assessments of the sublime are examples of important aesthetic and philosophical categories that have long played an important role in the Western tradition. The sublime in Romantic literature offered a spiritual and emotional experience of the immensity and the might of nature - and caused feelings of awe and wonder, and even fear, but much of the time brought spiritual elevation or transcendence. However, the sublime changes dramatically in the factors related to the Anthropocene. Losing the quality of spiritual uplift, the natural sublime turns into the monster, into the chaos, into the incommensurable, in control, the reflection of man-made destruction of the planet. In this section, the author examines how Romantic sublime based on metaphysical awe has transformed into the Anthropocene sublime based on ecological dread.

The Romantic Sublime: Awe, Transcendence, and Nature as Spiritual Force

The Romantic sublime was deeply influenced by Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which defined the sublime as “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger... it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke 39). but this fear is self-contradictorily agreeable--so that which one is touched by, when he looks out securely at a furious tempest, or a range of mountains, or a cavernous abyss. This was adopted by the romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge who took it to another state of moral and metaphysical experience. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes an encounter with the Alps that fills him with a sense of cosmic wonder: “The immeasurable height / of woods decaying, never to be decayed” (Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book VI, lines 525–526). Nature is sublime in this amazingness which indicates something major, lasting and unhuman in it.

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Similarly, in *Mont Blanc* (1816), Shelley writes:

“Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,
Remote, serene, and inaccessible.”

(*Mont Blanc*, lines 96–97)

Such a power nature does not devastate it but saves. As Marjorie Hope Nicolson argued in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, the Romantic sublime was a response to Enlightenment rationalism, attempting to restore mystery and meaning to a disenchanted world (Nicolson 74).

The Anthropocene Sublime: Ruin, Scale, and Dread

By contrast, the current theorists may refer to the Anthropocene sublime as a new type of sublimity that appears as the result of the ecological disaster, the planetary instability, and the human guilt in the ecological devastation. Its terror is not the securely distanced and redemptive, but is in the here and now, irredeemable, and bound up with guilt. Kate Rigby, a leading ecocritic, describes the Anthropocene sublime as “a reaction not to the vastness of divine nature but to the vastness of human destruction—climate change, nuclear fallout, extinction events” (Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster*, 45). This sublime is not transcendent but immanent: that helps us to recollect that we are embedded in systems we can do nothing about and could not always know in detail. T.J. Demos, in *Against the Anthropocene*, contrasts the Romantic sublime's elevation with the Anthropocene sublime's “sense of scale so immense that it resists comprehension,” a scale which “no longer inspires awe, but dread” (Demos 58). Photographs of floodgates to keep the sea at bay, bleached coral beds, and ice-melt sheets generate not amazement but ecological melancholy. The most common interpretation of the Anthropocene sublime in literature and popular art is the wasteland, the ruined city, the contaminated landscape. For instance, in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), the mysterious Area X presents a landscape where nature has become hostile, mutated, and incomprehensible. The characters fail to discover spirituality and instead enter into psychological and ontological confusion- which are features of the Anthropocene sublime.

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From Nature as Other to Nature as Haunting

One of the vital contrasts between the Romantic and the Anthropocene sublime is the place of human as a subject. In Romanticism, the sublime experience momentarily overwhelms the self but ultimately affirms human consciousness as capable of comprehending (or at least enduring) such immensity. Anthropocene sublime, in its turn, challenges even the self, which begins to appear the very idea that the human agency has outstripped its own boundaries and released forces to which it is now powerless to address. Timothy Morton calls this the encounter with “hyperobjects”—entities like global warming or nuclear waste that are so vast in scale and duration that they exceed normal temporal and spatial understanding (*Hyperobjects*, 1–2). This inability to understand the Anthropocene is what makes Anthropocene horrific. The planet turns into the place of uncanny homecoming, with the outcomes of industrialization, increase of temperature, polluted oceans, climate refugees, rushing into our lives like ghosts. Therefore, unlike the Romantic sublime with its distance and its divine mystery, the difference in the Anthropocene sublime is its closeness and monster closeness. Terror is not in nature anymore, but what nature has been turned into by humanity.

Aesthetic Implications: From Sublime to Grotesque

Whereas the Romantic sublime was so frequently characterized in terms of the picturesque and massive, in the Anthropocene sublime there is certain gravitation towards the grotesque and abject. The autophagy of ecologies, of species mutations, the failure of the harmonic aspect of biology are aesthetic lingo not of beauty but of collapse. Frederick Buell, writing on environmental crisis literature, describes this shift as a move from “pastoral idealism to apocalyptic realism” (Buell, 221). Similarly, Mark Fisher’s notion of “the eerie” (events without a cause) and “the weird” (presence of something where it shouldn’t be) helps describe the altered ontological state of Anthropocene horror, where the planet itself becomes an uncanny presence (Fisher 61). This is clearly dramatized in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), where the planet is ravaged by genetic engineering, pandemics, and environmental breakdown. Nature,

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which at one time was the teacher and comfort to Wordsworth, now is used as a freak show of grotesque experiment and permanent damage.

- **Case Study: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein***

Romantic Anti-Industrialism, Technological Hubris and Proto-Anthropocene Horror

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) stands at the intersection of Romantic literature, early science fiction, and proto-environmental horror. Although most often viewed as a warning about the dangers of scientific hubris, *Frankenstein* also speaks to the Romantic criticism of Enlightenment rationalism, industrialized progress and ecological alienation which is the cornerstone of Romantic anti-industrialism and Anthropocene horror as we describe it in the modern era. It is by recounting the tragic uncontrolled ambition of Victor Frankenstein who seeks to control the natural order that Shelley foreshadows the effects that uncontrolled technology capabilities and human alienation of their natural environment will have.

Romantic Roots and Anti-Enlightenment Ethos

Frankenstein is a work that was formulated at the height of British Romanticism and possesses many of the same ideological anxieties as that of Romanticism. Like her contemporaries William Blake and Percy Shelley (her husband), Mary Shelley distrusted the Enlightenment's valorization of reason, science, and technological dominion over nature. In *Frankenstein*, Victor's scientific project—to bestow life upon dead matter—embodies the Enlightenment ideal of rational control, but it is ultimately portrayed as disastrous and unnatural. As Anne K. Mellor argues, *Frankenstein* is “a critique of the hubris of science divorced from the moral and aesthetic concerns of the Romantic imagination” (Mellor 274). Victor’s ambition to “pioneer a new way” and “pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (Shelley 38) echoes Baconian scientific optimism, but the language also foreshadows catastrophe. His ambition of achieving the status of

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God-like designers of nature alienates him of the emotional and ethical ties which exist between humans and nature.

Industrialization and the Desecration of Nature

Though *Frankenstein* does not directly depict the factory or the city, it conveys the disruption of natural harmony through Victor's desecration of the human body and natural law. The anticipation of creating something by mechanical or artificial process as present in the novel brings the anxiety which is similar to the Romantic fear of mechanization and industrialization as the powers which corrupt not only human life but also nature. James McKusick interprets Frankenstein's laboratory as an analogue to the industrial factory: "a place of dehumanization, dismemberment, and the fragmentation of organic unity" (McKusick 110). The monstrosity is the embodiment of industrial reasoning as the creature is a compilation of disparate pieces- the juxtaposition of nothingness, creation without ties and production without consequence. There are also snatches of ecological consciousness implemented in the novel by Shelley. Not only is nature described as a setting, but also it is described as a healing, nourishing and ethic-related power. Victor seeks reprieve after bouts of suffering by taking refuge in the Alps, or the Orkneys, and is momentarily relieved by the sublimity of landscapes. However, these incidents do not last long signifying that human interference in the order of nature has forever broken its harmony.

The Creature as Anthropocene Allegory

The monster as a personality can be regarded as a symbol of ecological punishment or a symbol of the unforeseen results of the human technological hubris. His words—"I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel" (Shelley 87)—signal his awareness of abandonment and moral alienation. The creature in the Anthropocene setting is a symbol of long running consequences of human actions on nature, those that are accidentally produced, monstrous, and beyond control. Hyperobjects defined by the theory by Timothy Morton, which refers to such phenomena as climate change or nuclear fallout defying understanding and transcending human

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control, can be applied here. The creature, such as a hyperobject is a thing that was created whose effects go way beyond the source. Once born, he cannot be unmade; he haunts Victor and humanity, just as climate change and ecological degradation haunt modern civilization (Morton 1–3). Furthermore, the fact that the creature is in need of companionship, and that Victor denies the creature by refusing to create a second creature, is an inclusion of the Romantic solicitude of relational ethics as documented by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*. To create life without regard for its autonomy and ecological embeddedness is to reduce nature to machinery—a fundamental crime in both Romantic and ecological ethics (Bennett 117).

Romantic Landscape and the Failure of the Sublime

The novel often appeals to the Romantic sublime, in particular, the alpine settings. The language and the imagery employed by Shelley use extensively the Wordsworthian use of language in describing the scene in the mountain of Mont Blanc and the valleys of Switzerland. However, the sublime does not work the way it works with Wordsworth as through his landscape revolve around spiritual regeneration, whereas with Victor and the creature it does not. As Noel Jackson notes, *Frankenstein* dramatizes the collapse of the Romantic sublime into existential despair: “Where Wordsworth finds transcendence, Shelley’s characters find only momentary reprieve from their inner desolation” (Jackson 213). It signals the Anthropocene sublime, in which nature is no longer an avenue to spiritual enlightenment but a stage and means of horror and non-reversible effect.

Frankenstein as Proto-Anthropocene Horror

Frankenstein shows itself, through a layer of Anthropocene reading, to be a progenitor of the eco-horror genre. The transgression of Victor is a precursor to contemporary crises that include genetic engineering, synthetic biology and climate manipulation. The creature, the product of inhuman science, the abandoned construct, the outcast who wanders the wastelands, becomes a kind of symbolic representation of the calmly presented post-human effect of human estrangement with the natural world and recognition of the impossibility of evading the monsters

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created by that disastrously separated humanity. As Bill McKibben observes, *Frankenstein* "foresaw the moment when human power would exceed its wisdom" (*The End of Nature* 42). This fits a story that happens later in the novel, wretched scenes upon the freezing waste of the Arctic, where the possibility of feeling the human heart is only anticipation, the possible destruction of the planet, a vision made horrendously meaningful in an era of melting polar caps and rising sea levels.

Conclusion

Compared to the Romantic era, the Anthropocene is not a new story in literature, it is the continuation, the dark culmination of those same anxieties that were already expressed back when Romanticism first articulated them. The mechanistic rationalism and industrial progress that was criticized by the Romantics through the writings of Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley was also a protest of a spiritual and moral appeal towards the sacredness of nature. These initial demonstrations can be described as naive and idealistic or even nostalgic but in hindsight, their warnings are prophetic now that we are experiencing irreversible destruction of the environment. A critical juxtaposition of Romantic literature and contemporary climate fiction used in this article has revealed that Anthropocene horror is a literal descendant of Romantic anti-industrialism in aesthetic and philosophical terms. The sublime, in which people could reconnect with nature and feel their spiritual elevation through the powerful beauty of the nature, has become a grotesque nightmare of fear and orderlessness the so-called Anthropocene sublime occupied by scholars now. A haunting of the present with the legacies of industries, fear and uncertainty of ecology turns nature into a zone of terror and decline instead of an asset of solace. The novel of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, as a case study, is a romantic conflagration of scientific hubris and environmental alienation of the scientific zeitgeist that makes it an early literary prefiguring of the Anthropocene horrorfiction. The artifact as symbol of tech overreach, unintended consequences, is very current now with the hyperobjects of our day such as climate

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change and environmental degradation, not to mention their monumental scale, incomprehensibility, and inescapability.

The end result is, however, that the literature becomes both witness and warning. The Romantic vision, which was based in opposition to industrialized exploitation, has a dark history, one that in its own turn has now reached the dystopian novel, eco-horror, and cli-fi. When the Romantics used to dream about bringing humanity and nature back together, the present-day literary scene proves that the dream did not come true. The Anthropocene is therefore full blown not only environmental horror but also existential horror: one of refuting our listening to the past- one of a grim reminder to redraw connection with the planet before it is damaged irreparably.

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