DARKNESS

George Gordon Byron

Analysis by Fausto Ciompi

Lyric

"Darkness" by Lord Byron was published in 1816 in the collection *The Prisoner of Chillon, and Other Poems*. Inspired by the ecological consequences of Mount Tambora's eruption in 1815, the poem depicts an apocalyptic Earth. By using blank verse, and drawing on nihilistic imagery, Byron portrays societal collapse and ecological devastation. The poem reflects a determinist and pessimist worldview, rejecting faith and hope, and presenting nature as indifferent.

Year of Publication	1816
Publication Place	London
Editor	John Murray
Entity	Mount Tambora
Collection	The Prisoner of Chillon and Other Poems

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption Mount Tambora

REAL EVENT

Time	5 April 1815
Location	Lesser Sunda Islands Indonesia
Coordinates	-8.247193, 118.002265
Impacted Areas	LOCAL: Sunbawa, Indonesia, Sout East Asia. GLOBAL: "Year Without a Summer" (1816): Caused by volcanic aerosols reflecting sunlight. Resulted in widespread crop failures in North America, Europe, and China. Snow in June and frost in August in northeastern U.S. Food shortages led to famine, riots, and mass migration. Global temperature drop: Estimated to be 0.4–0.7°C (0.7–1.3°F) over the following years. Widespread disease: Malnutrition contributed to disease outbreaks, especially typhus in Europe.
Base/Complex	60 km
Typology	Explosive

"Velocity analysis of common-mid-point data indicate velocity in pyroclastic material from the 1815 eruption of Tambora ranges from 0.091–0.105 m/ns. These values are consistent with velocities derived from visual correlations between radar stratigraphy and volcanic stratigraphy at discrete trench sites." (Abrams et al. 361)

Volcano/Eruption Typology	Stratovolcano Explosive Volcanic Explosivity Index (VEI): 7, Plinian eruption
Anthropization Level	Remote Dwellings Houses Metropolis DRY FOG: "According to a New York report, the dry fog reddened and dimmed the sun to such an extent that sunspots became visible to the naked eye" (Stothers 1194) Agriculture Areas YEAR WITHOUT A SUMMER: "To Europeans and North Americans, 1816 became known as "the year without a summer" (41). Daily temperatures (especially the daily minimums) were in many cases abnormally low from late spring through early fall; frequent northwest winds brought snow and frost to northern New England and Canada, and heavy rains fell in western Europe. Many crops failed to ripen, and the poor harvests led to famine, disease, and social distress, compounded by the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. Tambora's dust veil is often blamed by modern researchers for the cold summer of 1816. The argument given is that the stratospheric dust veil would have absorbed or reflected solar radiation that could otherwise have reached the ground" (Stothers 1196)
Ecological Impacts	Tsunami Physical Landscape Changes Atmospheric Changes
Social Impacts	Diseases Resource Depletion "Many crops failed to ripen, and the poor harvests led to famine, disease, and social distress, compounded by the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars" (Stothers 1196)

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Volcanos Fires War Famine
Metaphors	"the eye/Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:" (lines 38-39)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus Apocalypse Cruel Nature Death Ruins War The End Of The World The Downfall Of Society
Syntax	Parataxis
Morphology	Preference For Verbs Adverbs
Phonetics/Prosody	Relevance of language rhythm

Lord Byron's "Darkness", first published in 1816 as part of *The Prisoner of Chillon, and Other Poems*, was penned in July 1816 at Villa Diodati near Lake Geneva, Switzerland. The poem emerged from the profound climate disruption of the "Year Without a Summer," a period of unseasonal cold and gloom that, unbeknownst to Byron and his European contemporaries, was a direct consequence of the April 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora in present-day Indonesia. The volcanic ash and dust spread atmospherically, casting a pall over Europe and leading to widespread apocalyptic interpretations that resonated with the eschatological mood of the era. This pervasive sense of an impending end significantly influenced the poetry of the time, a fact Byron keenly observed. As Redford notes, "One such eschatological text that appears to have directly influenced Byron is George Townsend's epic poem *Armageddon*, the plan for which was featured in the *London Review* in 1809" (133). The bleak outlook articulated in "Darkness" also found an echo in the Bologna Prophecy, an anonymous Italian astronomer's prediction that "the sun would burn itself out on July 18" (Vail 183).

Furthermore, Jerome McGann observes that "The Byronic mode is to take for its text Lord Byron's 'personal life'" (43). Beyond its engagement with such contemporary anxieties, "Darkness" is in fact deeply rooted in Byron's personal experience. Fleeing England, he was escaping scandal, including a failed marriage and debts. But when he arrived in Switzerland, in a year devoid of summer's warmth, Byron's striking term for the imagination, "The Sun of the sleepless," could only make a dark, albeit powerful, appearance in the poem. It ca be argued, then, that "Darkness" transcends mere personal reflection or contemporary commentary. According to Jonathan Bate, the key to the poem's writing was the weather:

"The Oxford edition pins the poem's date of composition down to the five weeks between 21 July and 25 August 1816. I propose that the key which unlocks it is an apparendy flippant remark in a letter of Byron to Samuel Rogers, dated 29 July 1816: 'we have had lately such stupid mists? fogs? rains? and perpetual density? that one would think Castlereagh had the foreign affairs of the kingdom of Heaven also? upon his hands.' The summer weather around Lake Geneva is always variable, but in 1816 Byron found it particularly irksome. A month earlier, he had complained in a letter to John Murray of the 'stress of weather' (*Letters* 5-81). This, it seems to me, is where "Darkness" begins: with the stress of weather. The poem opens, 'I had a dream, which was not all a dream. / The bright sun was extinguish'd.'" Does it stretch credulity too far to suppose that the first clause of the second sentence follows from the second
clause of the first sentence? That the extinguished sun was not all a dream? Might the origin of the poem not be the absence of sunshine in June, July and August 1816'" (433)

Originally interpreted as a "last man" narrative (Horn), "Darkness" has since attracted ecocritical readings that examine its engagement with climate catastrophe and environmental collapse. Byron powerfully evokes the sheer scale of ecological devastation, depicting forests consumed by fire, yet even these conflagrations "fell and faded… and all was black" (lines 19–21) hour by hour, leaving behind a scene of absolute desolation. As D'Arcy Wood aptly summarizes, the poem is "a literary speculation on a literal error, a profoundly ecological poem in its intuition of both the human impact of natural disaster … and its harrowing images of an environmentally degraded world" (44). And Byron can be read as "an ecological materialist, with an understanding of human cultural forms and practices shaping and being shaped by bioregional forces" (Hubbell 5). In a planet that has gone crazy, he realizes that even animals behave in extraordinary ways: "The behaviour of the vipers can be read as the kind of strange portent that might accompany a Biblical apocalypse, but it can also be read ecologically. In the absence of the sun's rays, cold-blooded creatures are unable to maintain their body heat. Therefore they seek to 'twine' themselves among humans for warmth. In a poem full of cruel ironies, this leads to their destruction. 'Darkness' shows birds losing their defining characteristic of flight and serpents losing their defining characteristic of venom." (Higgins 92).

In the opening lines of the poem the speaker dreams, though what he sees feels disturbingly real. Blending the descriptive with the expressive (Bonard and Deonna 55), the speaker remarks that he sun has vanished, leaving behind only stars drifting aimlessly in the blackness of space. No light remains, no guidance—only a frozen Earth, "blind and blackening in the moonless air" (line 5), turning silently beneath a darkened sky. Morning arrives and passes, but daylight never returns. Humanity succumbs to fear, and in the face of overwhelming ruin, people abandon their passions: "All hearts / Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light" (lines 8–9); each person prays only for

illumination, thinking only of personal survival. They gather around fires to endure—flames kindled in “the palaces of crowned kings—the huts, / The habitations of all things which dwell” (lines 11–12). Every structure, from royal courts to humble homes, is sacrificed for light. Entire cities are set ablaze, becoming “beacons” in the darkness (line 13). People stand by the burning remains of their dwellings, longing simply to “look once more into each other’s face” (line 15). Those who live near volcanic eruptions are seen as fortunate: “the volcanos, and their mountain-torch” offer warmth in an otherwise frozen world (line 17). The only thing left is “a fearful hope” (line 18): a desperate wish for survival. Forests are set alight, but “hour by hour / They fell and faded... and all was black” (lines 19–21). As the fires die, darkness reclaims the earth. Firelight flickers across faces twisted by grief and hopelessness. Some “hid their eyes and wept” (line 25); others rest in silence, eerily smiling. Many rush about feeding the flames, which become their own “funeral piles” (line 28). They stare upward at “the dull sky, / The pall of a past world,” and then collapse, cursing heaven (lines 29–31). People “gnash’d their teeth and howl’d” (line 32); wild birds scream and flutter helplessly, their wings “useless” (line 34). Even the fiercest beasts become tame and fearful, while vipers slither among the crowds, “hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food” (line 37). War, briefly silenced by the catastrophe, resumes. As Byron writes, “War... did glut himself again: a meal was bought / With blood” (lines 38–39). Food is purchased with violence, and people sit apart, “gorging” themselves “in gloom” (line 41). Love disappears. The only thought left on Earth is “death, / Immediate and inglorious” (lines 42–43). Hunger devours everyone from within. The dead lie unburied and cannibalism overtakes humanity. Even dogs turn on their masters—except one, who remains loyal to a corpse, defending it from birds, beasts, and starving men. He whines and licks the lifeless hand that “answer’d not with a caress—he died” (line 54).

Amid personal upheaval after his departure from England, Byron captures the era’s apocalyptic mood, drawing inspiration from reports of daytime darkness so profound that birds roosted at noon and candles were required during daylight hours. The poem’s stark fusion of anti-biblical nihilism with biblical apocalyptic imagery deepens its emotional and symbolic impact, offering both a psychological portrait of despair and a chilling vision of societal disintegration. As Paul Dobraszczyk argues, the poem “foresees a future in which anthropocentric assumptions are undone by cosmic indifference” (Dobraszczyk 101). The teax maintains an enduring resonance as a meditation on a world consumed by darkness. Byron blends biblical apocalypse with a subversion of religious hope, constructing what Peter Thorslev calls “an anti-apocalypse—one that ends not in renewal but in cosmic finality” (Thorslev 134). While the poem borrows imagery from *Revelation,* such as “the dying embers of an altar-place” (line 58), it ultimately offers no redemption, only a terrifying void: “Darkness had no need / Of aid from them—She was the Universe” (lines 81–82). Byron meditates on individual psychological disintegration and a prophesies collective extinction. Neither civilization, nor nature help man. As one critic argues: "Unlike many Romantic poems that seek to find solace or transcendence in nature, 'Darkness' presents a vision of the natural world as utterly indifferent, even hostile, to human suffering, thereby challenging conventional notions of the sublime" (Schroeder 115).

The narrative presents a stark apocalyptic vision, articulated through the perspective of a dreaming poet, where the disappearance of the sun precipitates a profound transformation of the terrestrial environment. As critic James Phillips observes, "Beginning with the first-person singular pronoun, the poem does not elaborate the identity of its narrator beyond the bare ability to narrate the extinction of the universe. After the initial line the subject of every verb is in the third person. By declining to alternate between description and confessional statements regarding his response to what he sees, the narrator leaves it up to the apocalypse’s thematic materials to move a reader" (Phillips 162). The resultant perpetual night is characterized by the unguided drift of stars and the Earth's cold, moonless orbit, signifying a complete loss of orientation and warmth. This cataclysmic event engenders widespread human terror, leading to a societal collapse where collective endeavors are abandoned in favour of individual survival and a desperate craving for light. But Nihil prevails. As Paul De Man puts it: "The language of apocalypse in Byron is not merely about the end of the world but the end of meaning. In 'Darkness', the act of naming falters—what remains is silence, disintegration, and the abyss” (de Man 210). This situates Byron on the periphery of the Romantic tradition, rather than at its center: "Unlike the moral universe of Wordsworth or Blake, Byron offers no redemptive vision. His poetry denies providence; 'Darkness' is the most chilling rejection of theodicy in the Romantic canon” (Bloom 52). By the same token, "Darkness" "expresses in even more vivid imagery the sense

of impending doom, the imminent collapse of social order, and the consequent threat to the human species that pervades *Frankenstein* (1818)" (Morton 155).

In response to the looming darkness, humanity resorts to widespread immolation, consuming all available structures—from royal palaces to rudimentary shelters—to create temporary sources of warmth and illumination. Cities are depicted as self-consuming beacons, underscoring the desperate need for visual connection in the oppressive gloom. Proximate volcanic activity provides a fleeting advantage, highlighting the scarcity of natural light sources. However, despite the deliberate burning of forests, these efforts prove ephemeral, with the extinguishing flames heralding the relentless return of darkness and the collapse of the natural world.

The diminishing light reveals a society in advanced states of psychological and physical deterioration. Expressions of despair, resignation, and an unsettling, almost detached, acceptance are observed. The act of tending fires becomes a self-destructive ritual, a literal burning of resources that hastens the inevitable end. The portrayal of individuals cursing the heavens and engaging in primal displays of grief underscores a profound loss of hope. The natural world mirrors this descent into chaos, with birds rendered helpless and even predatory animals becoming submissive, ultimately serving as sustenance. As it has been argued, "what is most revealing about Byron's depiction of destruction is the way planetary crisis includes the rupturing of humanity's own connection with the animal kingdom" (Whitney 39): "The meagre by the meagre were devoured, / Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one" (lines 46-47).

The brief cessation of warfare is followed by its brutal resumption, marked by the exchange of sustenance for bloodshed and a complete absence of affection. The pervasive presence of death, depicted as swift and inglorious, coupled with endemic cannibalism among the starving, illustrates the ultimate breakdown of social order and human dignity. The poignant image of a single loyal dog, guarding its deceased master against both animalistic and human predators, serves as a solitary testament to a bygone era of relational bonds, ultimately succumbing to the overwhelming forces of hunger and death.

Among stylistic features, relevance is granted to the suffix *less.* In words like "Rayless", "pathless", "moonless", "useless", "stingless", "tombless", "sailorless", and consipicuously in the line "Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless" (71), it highlights the loss of traditional modes of existence for both the human and non-human worlds.

The poem uses a deliberate, unsettling meter to amplify its catastrophic vision: one which "transforms the conventional apocalyptic scenario into a deeply personal and psychological one, portraying not simply the end of the world but the end of a world *imagined* by human consciousness" (Paley 192). While primarily written in blank verse (unrhymed lines) and built on iambic pentameter, the poem constantly deviates from this strict rhythm. This fluctuating pace creates a sense of unease and discomfort, mirroring the chaotic events it describes. The near-total absence of rhyme contributes to a sombre, unadorned tone, rejecting traditional poetic musicality for starkness. Byron's use of enjambment (run-on lines) provides a feeling of relentless movement, while caesura (pauses within lines) introduces abruptness. Ultimately, the meter in "Darkness" isn't about beauty; it's about making the reader viscerally feel the crushing despair of a world losing its light.

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Created: 2025-07-17 | Last Updated: 2025-11-24