

Precarious Landscapes and Human Fragility in Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the depiction of precarious landscapes and human fragility in the works of Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson, two prominent Romantic writers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Through their vivid portrayals of decaying rural environments, eroding coastlines, and desolate seascapes, both authors use nature as a metaphor to reflect emotional vulnerability, societal instability, and existential uncertainties. Smith's focus on rural decay and personal grief contrasts with Robinson's juxtaposition of urban chaos and natural isolation, yet both converge on the theme of nature as an external manifestation of human fragility. By analyzing their works through the lenses of eco-criticism and feminist theory, the paper reveals how these authors critique gender dynamics and societal power structures through their representations of the natural world. This study contributes to a broader understanding of Romantic literature's engagement with nature, gender, and ecological destruction, highlighting the intersection between human fragility and environmental instability in their works.

1. Introduction

Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson were prominent literary figures of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, whose works contributed significantly to Romantic literature. Charlotte Smith, known for her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), often highlighted the natural world as a reflection of emotional and societal struggles. Her work is marked by themes of melancholy, personal loss, and social injustice, using natural imagery to evoke both beauty and decay (Curran, 1993). Similarly, Mary Robinson, a poet and novelist, gained recognition for her evocative descriptions of nature, particularly in works like *Lyrical Tales* (1800), where she explored themes of isolation, fragility, and political disillusionment. Both authors wrote during the Romantic era, a period deeply engaged with the natural world and its relationship to human emotions and philosophical inquiries (Labbe, 2017).

The Romantic movement, which began in the late 18th century, emphasized nature as a primary source of inspiration and contemplation. Writers of this period often viewed the natural world as a reflection of human emotion, particularly in its ability to represent the sublime—those awe-inspiring, powerful forces that both terrified and fascinated individuals (Burke, 1757). For Smith and Robinson, precarious landscapes—whether through rugged coastlines, stormy seas, or decaying rural settings—become metaphors for human fragility and the instability of societal structures. Their depictions of nature not only highlight personal emotional turmoil but also suggest broader social and political fragility in the face of forces beyond human control (Pascoe, 1997).

2. Objectives

The aim of this paper is to investigate how precarious landscapes reflect human fragility in the works of Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson. By analyzing their treatment of nature as a metaphor for instability and vulnerability, this study will explore the ways in which both authors use environmental imagery to comment on emotional fragility, societal constraints, and existential anxieties. The paper will focus on key themes such as isolation, emotional distress, and the destructive power of nature, examining how these elements reinforce their commentary on human vulnerability.

Ultimately, both Smith and Robinson use natural landscapes to mirror the precarious conditions of human life. They

emphasize how emotional fragility is exacerbated by societal constraints and existential uncertainties, showing that just as nature is unpredictable and often destructive, so too are the forces that shape human experience (Curran, 1993; Labbe, 2017). Through this lens, their works become not only reflections of personal suffering but also critiques of a society fraught with instability and fragility.

3. Theoretical Framework: Romanticism and the Sublime

Romanticism and Nature

The Romantic movement, emerging in the late 18th century, is closely associated with a deep reverence for nature and its representation in literature. Romantic writers often viewed nature as a powerful force that was not only beautiful but also capable of reflecting the emotional and spiritual struggles of humanity. In the works of poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and later, Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson, nature became a primary lens through which the human condition—its joys, sorrows, and fragilities—was explored (McKusick, 2010). Romanticism's connection to nature emphasized both its nurturing and destructive aspects, portraying it as a mirror to the internal emotional landscapes of individuals. This interplay between the external environment and inner human experiences is a hallmark of Romantic literature, where nature often acts as a stage for personal and existential turmoil.

Smith and Robinson, in particular, harnessed nature's dual role as both serene and precarious. For Smith, the rural decay and tumultuous coastlines in works such as *Elegiac Sonnets* symbolized both personal grief and broader societal decay (Labbe, 2017). Similarly, Robinson used stormy seascapes and desolate landscapes in *Lyrical Tales* to illustrate human isolation and vulnerability. In their writings, nature not only reflects emotional struggles but also serves as a metaphor for social instability, echoing the Romantic belief in the interconnection between the natural world and human existence (Pascoe, 1997).

The Sublime and the Beautiful

Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) provides a crucial framework for understanding Romanticism's treatment of nature. Burke defined the sublime as a concept that evokes awe and terror, arising from vastness, obscurity, and power, while the beautiful is associated with harmony, pleasure, and serenity (Burke, 1757). These ideas were highly influential during the Romantic period and were used by writers to explore the tension between awe-inspiring natural forces and human vulnerability.

In the works of Smith and Robinson, the sublime often emerges through descriptions of overwhelming natural phenomena—tempestuous seas, rugged landscapes, and decaying ruins—that symbolize the fragility of human life. Smith, for example, frequently invokes the sublime in her depictions of coastal storms and eroding cliffs, representing both the physical destruction of nature and the emotional upheaval within her characters (Curran, 1993). Robinson, too, utilizes the sublime in poems such as *The Haunted Beach*, where the vast and dangerous sea serves as a metaphor for human isolation and existential dread (Pascoe, 1997). These writers blur the line between the beautiful and the sublime, using both concepts to highlight the precariousness of human existence in the face of uncontrollable natural forces.

Eco-Criticism and Feminist Perspectives

An eco-critical perspective offers a contemporary approach to analyzing the relationship between nature and human fragility in Smith and Robinson's works. Eco-criticism explores how literature reflects ecological concerns and human interactions with the natural world, often highlighting themes of environmental destruction, displacement, and human vulnerability (Glotfelty, 1996). In this context, Smith and Robinson's landscapes can be seen not only as metaphors for emotional and social instability but also as early reflections on humanity's impact on nature. Smith's portrayal of decaying rural settings and eroding coastlines, for instance, can be read as a critique of human exploitation of the environment and its destructive consequences (Labbe, 2017).

Feminist literary criticism further deepens the analysis by examining how Smith and Robinson use nature to explore themes of gender and power. Both authors depict female characters who, like the landscapes they inhabit, are subject to forces beyond their control, such as societal expectations, emotional repression, and political marginalization. Nature becomes a symbol of women's precarious position within patriarchal society, reflecting both their fragility and their resilience (Mellor, 1993). Through this feminist lens, the precarious landscapes in their works highlight not only human fragility but also the specific vulnerabilities faced by women in a society that often devalues their voices and experiences.

4. Precarious Landscapes in Charlotte Smith's Works

Smith's Depiction of Coastal and Rural Landscapes

Charlotte Smith's poetry and novels are renowned for their vivid depictions of natural landscapes, particularly the coastal and rural settings that often serve as metaphors for personal and societal instability. In her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), Smith

frequently portrays coastal erosion and tempestuous weather as symbols of emotional turmoil and the fragility of human existence. For example, in "Sonnet XLIV – Written in the Churchyard at Middleton in Sussex," Smith describes the eroding cliffs as a reflection of both personal grief and the broader decay of the social order, where "the sea consumes the land" just as sorrow consumes the individual (Curran, 1993). Similarly, in *The Old Manor House* (1793), Smith's use of rural decay symbolizes the destabilization of both family structures and the English countryside, mirroring the social upheavals of the time (Labbe, 2017). Through these landscapes, Smith conveys a sense of impermanence and instability, using nature's precarity as a direct parallel to the emotional and social fragility of her characters.

Human Fragility and Emotional Turmoil

Smith's characters are often depicted as deeply entwined with the natural environments they inhabit, with landscapes reflecting their internal emotional states. In her poetry, nature becomes an external representation of grief, loss, and emotional suffering. The storms, decaying landscapes, and eroding coastlines not only serve as backdrops but also as symbols of the emotional turmoil her protagonists endure. For example, in *Elegiac Sonnets*, the tumultuous sea and crumbling cliffs frequently serve as metaphors for the characters' isolation and sorrow, with Smith writing from a place of personal loss and societal marginalization as a widow and woman in a patriarchal society (Pascoe, 1997). This connection between landscape and emotion emphasizes the fragile nature of both the human psyche and the societal structures that surround her characters.

Smith's landscapes often highlight societal marginalization, particularly of women, who are portrayed as vulnerable to forces beyond their control—both natural and social. The instability of these landscapes mirrors the precarious position of her female protagonists, who must navigate a world that frequently undermines their agency and security. In this way, Smith uses nature to underscore the emotional and social vulnerabilities of her characters, reflecting broader Romantic themes of alienation and disenfranchisement (Labbe, 2017).

Smith's Environmental Awareness

Smith's works also exhibit an early environmental consciousness, where nature's destructive power is not just a metaphor for personal or social vulnerability but also a reflection of humanity's destructive relationship with the environment. Smith often draws attention to the destructive forces of nature as a consequence of human actions, particularly the exploitation of the land. In her poems, the eroding cliffs and decaying rural landscapes serve as early warnings of the environmental degradation caused by human negligence and greed (McKusick, 2010). For instance, in her *Elegiac Sonnets*, the depiction of coastal erosion can be interpreted as not only a personal lament but also an ecological critique of human impact on the land.

Through this lens, Smith's works can be seen as engaging with proto-ecological themes, where nature's destructive power is a direct result of political and social mismanagement. The precarious landscapes in her writing reflect both a personal vulnerability to nature's forces and a broader political vulnerability, as these natural images often parallel the social and political instabilities of the time, including the effects of war, poverty, and displacement (Curran, 1993). In doing so, Smith reveals a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between human society and the natural world, positioning her as an early voice in environmental consciousness.

5. Precarious Landscapes in Mary Robinson's Works

Urban and Natural Landscapes in Robinson's Poetry and Prose

In Mary Robinson's works, particularly *Lyrical Tales* (1800) and *The Haunted Beach* (1798), the juxtaposition of urban chaos and natural landscapes serves as a key method for exploring human fragility. Robinson often contrasts the unpredictable, overwhelming forces of nature with the disorder and moral decay of urban life. In *Lyrical Tales*, she depicts both urban and natural settings as spaces where characters face uncertainty, vulnerability, and despair. The natural world, in Robinson's vision, is not a source of solace but rather a reflection of the tumultuous emotional and social conditions her characters endure. For example, in *The Haunted Beach*, the desolate seascape becomes a metaphor for human isolation and guilt, mirroring the character's inner torment and exile from society (Pascoe, 1997). By using such settings, Robinson not only critiques the instability of human existence but also underscores how nature can both reflect and exacerbate human fragility.

Themes of Isolation and Social Exclusion

Robinson's works often focus on characters who experience isolation and exclusion, both from society and within themselves. Her use of desolate and isolated landscapes serves to mirror these themes of personal exile, illness, and rejection. In *The Haunted Beach*, for example, the lonely figure of the protagonist, haunted by a dark past, is mirrored by the barren, abandoned landscape of the beach. This environment becomes symbolic of the protagonist's moral and social isolation, with nature reinforcing the emotional distance and sense of guilt that consumes him (Labbe, 2017). Similarly,

Robinson frequently portrays her female characters as physically or socially isolated, reflecting the gendered marginalization they experience in a patriarchal society. In such cases, nature acts as a silent witness to their suffering, highlighting the fragility of their position in a world that excludes them from power and social recognition (Mellor, 1993). Through her depiction of these isolated landscapes, Robinson also explores the emotional consequences of illness and exile. Her characters, often depicted as fragile or physically weakened, are positioned against the backdrop of a harsh and unyielding natural world, reinforcing their sense of helplessness. In these moments, nature becomes a metaphor for the illness and societal rejection they endure, illustrating Robinson's concern with the physical and emotional vulnerabilities of her characters (Curran, 1993).

Robinson's Political and Social Commentary

Robinson's use of precarious landscapes also serves as a vehicle for her political and social commentary, particularly in relation to gender and class. Her works often highlight the fragility of social structures and the instability of political systems by drawing parallels between these constructs and the unpredictable forces of nature. In *Lyrical Tales*, Robinson critiques the social exclusion experienced by marginalized individuals, particularly women and the lower classes, using natural disasters and desolate environments as metaphors for the precariousness of their lives (Labbe, 2017). In *The Haunted Beach*, the moral decay and isolation of the protagonist can be read as a broader commentary on the political instability of the time, where social and political structures are shown to be as fragile and unpredictable as the landscape itself.

Robinson also critiques the role of gender in shaping the experiences of her characters, using nature to emphasize the precariousness of women's lives in a patriarchal society. In her works, women are frequently depicted as vulnerable to the forces of both society and nature, with their marginalization reflected in the desolate and unstable landscapes they inhabit. This intersection of gender, nature, and social critique aligns Robinson with the feminist literary traditions of the Romantic period, where nature often serves as a metaphor for both the resilience and vulnerability of women within restrictive social systems (Pascoe, 1997).

Robinson's landscapes, therefore, are not merely settings but active participants in her critique of social and political fragility. Through her depictions of precarious natural environments, she reveals the instability of the world her characters inhabit, whether it be the chaos of urban life or the isolation of rural exile. Her use of nature as a tool for social commentary allows her to explore the fragility of human existence, particularly for those marginalized by gender and class, and to critique the social and political systems that contribute to this vulnerability (Mellor, 1993).

6. Comparative Analysis of Smith and Robinson

Common Themes of Human Fragility in Nature

Both Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson frequently utilize nature as a powerful medium to depict human fragility, drawing parallels between external landscapes and the internal emotional states of their characters. In Smith's poetry, such as *Elegiac Sonnets*, and novels like *The Old Manor House*, the natural world—particularly rural and coastal settings—becomes a reflection of human suffering, grief, and societal decay (Curran, 1993). Similarly, in Robinson's works like *Lyrical Tales* and *The Haunted Beach*, natural landscapes serve as metaphors for human isolation, emotional instability, and the precariousness of societal structures (Labbe, 2017). Both authors emphasize the unpredictability and overwhelming power of nature, which mirrors the fragility of human life and the emotional turmoil of their protagonists. This shared thematic focus underscores the Romantic preoccupation with nature as a force that both shapes and reflects the human condition, particularly in moments of vulnerability and existential uncertainty.

Smith and Robinson also depict landscapes as external representations of internal psychological and emotional states, employing vivid natural imagery to articulate feelings of loss, isolation, and despair. In Smith's writing, the crumbling cliffs and eroding shorelines often symbolize the emotional disintegration of her characters, particularly in the context of personal grief or social marginalization (Pascoe, 1997). Robinson, on the other hand, uses desolate landscapes—both urban and rural—to reflect themes of personal exile and societal exclusion, where the harshness of the natural world underscores the fragility of her characters' emotional and social positions (Mellor, 1993). This shared use of nature as a mirror for human fragility connects the two authors, despite their differing approaches to setting and theme.

Differences in Literary Approach

While Smith and Robinson share common themes, their literary approaches to depicting human fragility in nature diverge in tone, style, and thematic emphasis. Smith's works are often marked by a melancholic, reflective tone, where rural decay and the slow erosion of landscapes mirror the gradual unraveling of personal and societal stability. Her focus on rural environments, such as the decaying countryside and the eroding coastline, serves as a direct metaphor for both personal

loss and the larger social upheavals of her time (Curran, 1993). This slow decay is emblematic of Smith's style, where the natural world is portrayed as both beautiful and tragic, with its decline paralleling the emotional and societal decay of her characters.

Robinson, in contrast, adopts a more dramatic tone, particularly in her juxtaposition of urban chaos and natural desolation. Her poetry often moves between the disorder of urban life and the isolation of natural landscapes, using both to highlight the precariousness of human existence (Labbe, 2017). For instance, in *The Haunted Beach*, Robinson's use of a barren, desolate beach emphasizes the emotional isolation of her protagonist, while her portrayal of chaotic urban settings in *Lyrical Tales* reflects the social and political instability of the time. This contrast between the urban and natural in Robinson's work marks a key difference from Smith's more consistent focus on rural decay, offering a broader exploration of human fragility across different environments.

Gender, Nature, and Power

Both Smith and Robinson critique gender dynamics through their representations of nature and human fragility, using precarious landscapes to explore the vulnerabilities faced by women in a patriarchal society. In Smith's works, female characters are often depicted as being at the mercy of both natural forces and societal constraints, their emotional fragility mirrored by the instability of the landscapes they inhabit (Mellor, 1993). Smith's rural settings, with their eroding cliffs and decaying manors, serve as metaphors for the limited agency and social power of women, who are often portrayed as isolated and marginalized in a world that devalues their experiences and voices.

Robinson similarly engages with gender dynamics through her depiction of desolate landscapes, but her focus on urban-natural contrasts allows her to critique both the societal and environmental forces that shape women's lives. In *Lyrical Tales*, for example, Robinson's female characters often find themselves isolated in both urban and natural settings, with nature reflecting their emotional and social exclusion (Labbe, 2017). Robinson's landscapes, much like Smith's, become metaphors for the precariousness of women's positions in society, where they are vulnerable to both natural forces and the social structures that marginalize them.

A feminist reading of both authors' works reveals how precarious landscapes serve as powerful symbols of the fragility and resilience of women within patriarchal systems. By aligning the vulnerability of their female characters with the instability of the natural world, both Smith and Robinson critique the power imbalances that define gender relations, using nature as a vehicle for exploring the emotional, social, and political vulnerabilities of women (Pascoe, 1997). Their works thus contribute to a broader feminist discourse within Romantic literature, where nature is not only a reflection of human emotion but also a commentary on the gendered dynamics of power and vulnerability.

7. Human Fragility and Ecological Destruction

Nature as a Symbol of Uncertainty

Both Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson utilize ecological destruction to symbolize societal collapse and human fragility, portraying nature as an unpredictable and uncontrollable force that mirrors the uncertainties of human life. In Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, the recurring image of eroding coastlines and decaying rural landscapes functions as a metaphor for both personal and social disintegration. The constant destruction of the natural environment in her works serves as a powerful symbol of the fragility of societal structures and the vulnerability of individuals within them (Curran, 1993). Similarly, Robinson's *The Haunted Beach* uses the imagery of a desolate and decaying seashore to reflect the instability of human existence, where the natural world's destructive power parallels the emotional and moral collapse of her characters (Labbe, 2017). In both authors' works, the destruction of nature becomes a reflection of societal decay, suggesting that just as the environment is fragile and subject to erosion, so too are the human institutions and emotional states that rely on it.

This use of ecological destruction highlights the Romantic preoccupation with nature as both beautiful and dangerous, embodying the tension between creation and destruction. By depicting landscapes in decay, both Smith and Robinson express a deep awareness of the uncertainties inherent in both the natural world and human society, using ecological imagery to critique the fragility of social and political systems (McKusick, 2010). In this sense, nature's destruction is not only a metaphor for personal emotional turmoil but also a broader symbol of societal instability and collapse.

Reflections on Mortality and Existence

The landscapes depicted by Smith and Robinson often serve as symbols of mortality, time, and the transient nature of human life. In both authors' works, nature is presented as a force that is indifferent to human existence, constantly shifting and eroding, reflecting the inevitable passage of time and the fragility of life itself. Smith, in particular, uses imagery of decaying rural settings and eroding coastlines to underscore the inevitability of death and the passage of time. Her descriptions of nature's slow but relentless destruction serve as a poignant reminder of the limitations of human existence

and the inescapability of mortality (Curran, 1993). In her *Elegiac Sonnets*, the natural world becomes a space where time is visibly at work, gradually wearing down both the landscape and the individuals who inhabit it.

Robinson's reflections on mortality are similarly conveyed through her depiction of precarious landscapes. In *The Haunted Beach*, the isolated and decaying seashore becomes a powerful symbol of the protagonist's existential dread and awareness of life's fleeting nature (Labbe, 2017). The harshness of the natural environment, with its constant reminders of decay and desolation, reflects the protagonist's internal struggles with guilt and mortality. Through these depictions, Robinson conveys a deep understanding of human limitations in the face of natural forces, using nature's destructive power as a metaphor for the inevitable decline of human life.

Both authors reflect on the transience of human existence by highlighting the power of nature to outlast and overwhelm human efforts at control. Their works suggest that human life is fragile and fleeting, always subject to the greater forces of nature and time. This theme is central to the Romantic conception of the sublime, where nature's overwhelming power reminds individuals of their own insignificance in the broader scheme of existence (Pascoe, 1997). In this way, both Smith and Robinson use precarious landscapes not only to reflect personal and societal fragility but also to explore the broader philosophical questions of mortality, time, and human limitations.

8. Conclusion

In summary, both Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson vividly depict precarious landscapes as central metaphors for human fragility in their works. Through the imagery of eroding coastlines, decaying rural settings, and desolate seascapes, these authors reflect the emotional vulnerability of their characters, highlighting themes of loss, isolation, and societal marginalization. Nature, in their writings, becomes more than just a backdrop; it is an active force that mirrors personal turmoil and societal instability. This alignment of natural destruction with human suffering underscores the Romantic preoccupation with the sublime and the transience of life, where landscapes serve as external representations of internal states (Curran, 1993; Labbe, 2017). The fragility of both society and the individual is emphasized through the uncontrollable forces of nature, which Smith and Robinson use to critique not only emotional vulnerability but also the precariousness of societal structures.

The paper contributes to Romantic and feminist literary studies by expanding the understanding of how nature functions as a metaphor for both personal and political instability. Smith and Robinson's works reveal how the natural world can reflect not only individual emotional states but also broader societal power dynamics, particularly in relation to gender. Their landscapes, imbued with the themes of ecological destruction and human fragility, offer early critiques of the relationship between humanity and the environment, contributing to the field of eco-criticism (McKusick, 2010). Furthermore, by examining their works through a feminist lens, the study highlights how both authors use nature to critique gendered power structures and explore the vulnerabilities of women in patriarchal society (Mellor, 1993).

For future research, further study could focus on the intersection of nature, gender, and fragility across a broader range of Romantic writers. Examining how other women authors of the period, such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld or Felicia Hemans, engage with similar themes of human vulnerability in the face of natural forces could offer deeper insights into the role of gender in Romantic eco-criticism. Additionally, exploring how the depiction of precarious landscapes evolves in later Romantic works could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the continuing relationship between nature and human fragility in literary traditions.

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