Adventures in Writing

By Helen Mort

Context
These creative writing prompts are designed to encourage students to engage with both climate change issues and with a range of texts from the Romantic period in both analytic and creative ways. By the end of the challenge, they should have discussed images and key extracts from texts and produced drafts of several poems, building towards the final ‘challenge’: a self-portrait poem.

Introduction and history
Sometimes a journey to a new landscape can alter the way you look at things. It might excite you. It might make you feel small in the face of it, aware of your true scale in the world, or alert to how much the earth is changing – and changing it certainly is. Over the last 200 years, human activities, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, have released sufficient quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to affect the global climate. The atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide has increased by more than 30% since pre-industrial times, trapping more heat in the lower atmosphere. This has resulted in melting ice caps, rising sea levels, increased acidification of the oceans and a major increase in extreme weather events, threatening crops, homes and lives across the globe. These changes combined with the exploitation of our seas, lands and forests through over-consumption and rampant industry, have led to an undeniable degradation and changing of the landscape – and major impacts on the species that inhabit it.

Our relationship with nature
The Romantic period (1780-1830) not only saw the beginnings of industrialisation and human-made climate change, but also a remarkable flowering of writing concerned with the complex and conflicted relationship between humans and nonhuman nature.

Topics at a glance
- Romanticism
- Nature poetry
- Imagery
- Climate change
Romantic authors were particularly concerned by our vulnerability to natural forces beyond our control, but also emphasised the power of the human imagination to shape the world. Comparing Romantic narratives of landscape and elemental forces to the ways that modern artists have responded to environmental change enables us to consider how we make connections with the ground beneath our feet – and offers us, perhaps, ways to take action to save it.

Adventures by sea
Poets have been trying to capture the effect that adventures can have on us for hundreds of years. From the very first steps of Shackleton, to modern adventurers who have set sail to map the human impacts on these once pristine and unchanged landscapes for organisations like the British Antarctic Survey or National Geographic, the call of the wild has always been strong. Even the early nineteenth century saw a number of dangerous polar explorations, encouraged by the apparent warming of the Arctic in the late 1810s. Here is an extract from ‘The Arctic Expeditions’ by Eleanor Anne Porden, written in 1818 when she was just 23. Ask the students to look at this extract in small groups and then engage with the discussion prompts that follow.
Now look at Chris Wainwright’s photograph ‘Red Ice’. What kind of mood does this depiction of ice create? In the original image, the artist has made the ice the colour red. Why do you think this is?

Adventures with height
Eleanor Anne Porden’s poem describes a journey by sea. The Romantic poets often looked towards high places – to the Alps, the grandeur of their scenery, the sense that mountains can make you feel small – much as enormous waves may have dwarfed the ships they journeyed on. Now, in the context of whole islands in the Pacific being swallowed up by the unstoppable rising sea levels, extreme flooding hitting the UK wrecking livelihoods and landscapes, and enormous glaciers breaking and smashing violently apart, do we see nature perhaps as more of a monstrous threat than ever before? When Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Godwin (later to become Mary Shelley) visited Mont Blanc, the valley of Chamonix, and the river Arve in 1816, they sensed the sublime power of the glaciers that surrounded them:

Thus thou, Ravine of Arve – dark, deep ravine –
Thou many-coloured, many-voicéd vale,
Over whose pines and crags and caverns sail
Fast clouds, shadows, and sunbeams; awful scene,
Where power in likeness of the Arve comes down,
From the ice-gulfs that gird his secret throne,
Bursting through these dark mountains like to the flame
Of lightning through the tempest…

Ask the students to read this extract out loud in pairs. What kind of mood does it create?

Now read William Wordsworth describing the same landscape. You could read this to the students and look at the extract together as a class.

..Awful it is to gaze on shoreless seas,
But more to view those restless billows freeze
One solid plain, or when like mountains piled,
Whole leagues in length, of forms sublimely wild,
In dreadful war the floating icebergs rush,
Horrent with trees that kindle as they crush;
The flickering compass points with fitful force,
And not a star in heaven directs your course,
But the broad sun, through all the endless day,
Wheels changeless round, sole beacon of your way;
Or through a night more dreadful, doomed to roam
Unknowing where, and hopeless of a home.

What kind of journey do you think this is – peaceful or turbulent? How does it contrast to the scene pictured in Ackroyd and Harvey’s photo ‘Ice Lens’?

In pairs, draw up a list of the key words and phrases Eleanor Anne uses to describe the scene, focussing on verbs and adjectives.
from ‘The Prelude’:

That very day,
From a bare ridge we also first beheld
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and
  grieved
To have a soulless image on the eye
That had usurped upon a living thought
That never more could be. The wondrous Vale
Of Chamouny stretched far below, and soon
With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice,
A motionless array of mighty waves,
Five rivers broad and vast, made rich amends,
And reconciled us to realities;
There small birds warble from the leafy trees,
The eagle soars high in the element,
There doth the reaper bind the yellow sheaf,
The maiden spread the haycock in the sun,
While Winter like a well-tamed lion walks,
Descending from the mountain to make sport
Among the cottages by beds of flowers.

Here, two people are seeing the same mountain slightly differently. Compare and contrast these two pieces of writing about the same mountain, picking out as many different descriptions as you can. Now look at the images of mountains depicted in ‘Mont Blanc: journey of the private moon in the Arctic’ by Tishkov.

How do these images of mountains make you feel? In awe? Excited? Frightened? Exhilarated? Make a mind map and write down as many words to describe your feelings as you can. This could be done as a whole class exercise with the teaching writing things up on the whiteboard.

When climbers put up a route on a mountain for the first time, they get to name it. Invent your own mountain. What would it look like? Where would it be? It doesn’t have to be a realistic mountain – it could be made of shoes, marshmallows or anything you like. Give your mountain a name. For example, you could call your poem something along the lines of:

- Climbing Mount Jealousy
- A Summit Made of Paper
- Mount Anxiety
- If Mountains Were Made of Cheese
- Adventures with darkness and weather

Sometimes, even a familiar landscape can be altered into a strange and surprising place, transformed by weather or by night. In Tishkov’s image from the ‘Journey of the Private Moon’ series, light and darkness are contrasted, the strange, artificial moon on the ground glowing bright. Lord Byron wrote his poem ‘Darkness’ around the same time as Percy Shelley wrote ‘Mont Blanc’. Both texts respond to the terrible weather of the ‘Year without a Summer’ of 1816, which was the result of a huge volcanic eruption the previous year, and imagine the horror of living in a cooling, darkening world. Byron describes ‘a dream / which was not all a dream’:

...The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still,
And nothing stirr’d within their silent depths;
Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,
And their masts fell down piecemeal; as they dropp’d,
They slept on the abyss without a surge –
The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The Moon, their mistress, had expired before;
The winds were wither’d in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish’d; Darkness had no need
Of aid from them – She was the Universe!
In the modern world of electricity we rely heavily on the ability to light up any dark corner – but this also consumes vast amounts of energy across the globe and forms part of the environmental threat. Imagine a place you know well, but imagine it without light. Imagine you are there in total darkness. What would the scene be like? What would you feel? Try to describe it as vividly as you can. Remember - you can use every sense apart from sight. Jot down your descriptions. If you’re not sure how to begin, you could start like this: ‘In the dark, I can hear….’

Seeing a place in extreme weather can enhance the sense of adventure or risk too. Here’s the labouring-class poet John Clare describing ‘winter floods’:

Waves trough – rebound – and furious boil again,
Like plunging monsters rising underneath,
Who at the top curl up a shaggy mane,
A moment catching at a surer breath,
Then plunging headlong down and down, and on
Each following whirls the shadow of the last;
And other monsters rise when these are gone

Look at ‘Drowning World’ by Gideon Mendel, which provides harrowing but beautiful portraits of whole cities getting submerged by freak floods and rising tides. Now look at ‘All The Seas’ by Tania Kovats, which explores the idea of natural elements being contained and displayed – the sea in a bottle. Discuss these pictures with the class and mind map the things they notice about the two images.

Choose a type of weather (it could be rain, wind, snow…). Now choose a container of some kind: a room, a box, a handbag, a pencil case. Put the weather in the container and see what happens. This is the title for your piece of writing, e.g. ‘Rain in a handbag’, ‘Snow in my kitchen’….

Think about how you are going to capture the reader’s attention with your opening line, e.g. ‘I open the bag, and a thunderstorm leaps out, / lightning singeing the carpet’.
Final challenge: an adventure ‘selfie’

All the scenes of adventure we’ve considered here have also contained a writer or an artist, someone who is looking at those things and observing them. How could the writer be brought into the scene too? Look at this photograph by Alex Boyd. The image shows musician Hannah Tuulikki in a surprising setting - it’s a portrait of an adventure.

Hannah’s project “Away with the Birds” looked to explore our relationship to birds, flight and freedom – she embodied a spirit taking on the elements. The photograph seems to have vanished! Now look at Antony Gormley’s ‘Marker One’ photograph, where a person stands next to a figure made from snow. Is this a portrait made from snow, a ghost or a double?

Here are some examples of poems that explore an element of self-portrait: bit.ly/selfportraits.

Your challenge is to create a self-portrait poem with a natural element or landscape. You might imagine you are made of it, or imagine you are standing next to it. You could even imagine that you have become a feature of the landscape and you’re writing from a new perspective, for example:

• ‘Self-portrait as a mountain’
• ‘Self-portrait with icebergs’
• ‘Self-portrait as a river’
• ‘Self-portrait as a snowflake’
• ‘Self-portrait in a forest.’
Be as imaginative as you like. Before you start, you might want to spend some time sketching out ideas for descriptions or phrases you might include. You might even do a drawing first!

Some suggested openings:

- Behind me is…
- I am made of…
- Inside the photograph
- Look at me…

Mind map ideas for self-portrait poem titles with the group first.

Helen Mort was born in Sheffield. She is a five-times winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award. Her first full-length collection, *Division Street* (Chatto & Windus, 2013) was shortlisted for the Costa Prize and the T.S. Eliot Prize and won the Fenton Aldeburgh Prize. In 2014 she was chosen as one of the Poetry Book Society’s Next Generation Poets. Her second collection, *No Map Could Show Them* (Chatto & Windus), is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation.

This resource has been developed in partnership with the British Romantic Writing and Environmental Catastrophe project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and based in the School of English at the University of Leeds. For further details, see: http://romanticcatastrophe.leeds.ac.uk