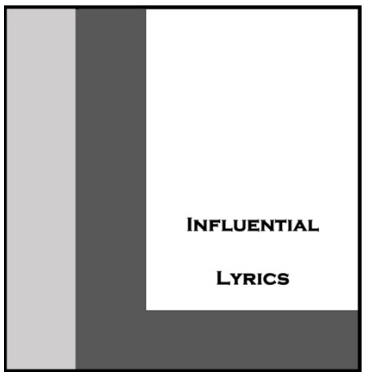

Series 1, Number 9

Charlotte Smith
1749-1806

Written at the Close of Spring

The garlands fade that Spring so lately wove,
  Each simple flower, which she had nursed in dew,
Anemonies, that spangled every grove,
  The primrose wan, and hare-bell, mildly blue.

No more shall violets linger in the dell,
  Or purple orchis variegate the plain,
Till Spring again shall call forth every bell,
  And dress with humid hands her wreaths again. –

Ah! poor humanity! so frail, so fair,
  Are the fond visions of thy early day,
Till tyrant passion, and corrosive care,
  Bid all thy fairy colours fade away!

Another May new buds and flowers shall bring:
Ah! why has happiness – no second Spring?

Podcast

Topics & Terms

- Literature of Sensibility
- Women writers

Lines to remember...

> Another May new buds and flowers shall bring:
> Ah! why has happiness – no second Spring?

Podcast Script

Charlotte Turner Smith, "Written at the Close of Spring"

It may seem odd to include a short poem by Charlotte Turner Smith in a podcast called "influential lyrics." After all, most students—even most English majors—have never even heard of Smith, and they certainly don't recognize her influence on readers and on the progression of English literary history. And yet, beginning with the 1784 publication of a short volume called *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith's work provided a potent catalyst for what came to be called the Romantic revolution in British literature. *Elegiac Sonnets* was very well known in its day, going through several editions in the last decades of the 18th century, and this volume was followed by a long poem called *The Emigrants* (1793) and another called *Beachy Head* which was published posthumously in 1807. But then, for reasons which I'll explain in the podcast, Smith's fame was eclipsed by the now more familiar (male) poets of high Romanticism—William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and others.

I have selected a single sonnet from Smith's collection to give a sense of her style and her typical thematic concerns. And let me add to these introductory notes a sort of trigger warning: Smith's poems often take on a distinctly melancholy, even depressing mood. In the following discussion I'll try to offer some explanation about why this might be especially prominent in Smith's poems. For the moment, though, let's have a listen to the sonnet. This is "Written at the Close of Spring" by Charlotte Turner Smith.

[poem]

So, formally speaking, this is a very regular English sonnet consisting of three distinct quatrains and a closing couplet. We can use this formal structure to assist in a quick explication.

The opening quatrain goes like this:

> The garlands fade that Spring so lately wove,
> Each simple flower, which she had nursed in dew,
> Anemonies, that spangled every grove,
> The primrose wan, and hare-bell, mildly blue.

So, we know something of the context from the title of the poem: this was written at the close of spring. What's more, the first three words of the quatrain present the subject and verb of the whole four-line sentence: "The garlands fade." In other words, the poem depicts that natural transition as the fresh blossoms of springtime are now fading away. The "garlands"—that is, the display of spring flowers—are past their prime. A personified Spring had brought these flowers into existence—as the poem says, Spring had "nursed them in dew." These were lovely and abundant flowers—anemonies, primroses, hare-bells. But the key here is that the flowers now are dying. It's a scene reminiscent of Shakespeare's Sonnet #12 that we looked at in a previous episode of *Influential Lyrics*.

This scene is then elaborated in the second quatrain:

> No more shall violets linger in the dell,
> Or purple orchis variegate the plain,
> Till Spring again shall call forth every bell,
> And dress with humid hands her wreaths again. –

So now we have a couple more flower species in the mix—violets and the "purple orchis"—and these too are fading: no more will they "linger in the dell" or "variegate the plain" (i.e. lend variety and color to the meadows). One might expect this natural observation to prompt some melancholy speculation about the inevitability of decline and death, but that's not what happens. Instead, this first section of the sonnet ends on an optimistic note: Spring will come again, will "call forth every bell," and will "dress with humid hands her wreaths again." The meaning is plain enough: We're dealing here with a natural cycle, and the flowers that die today will flourish once again when Spring returns next year. So far so good.

But the third quatrain develops a contrast between the recurrent seasonal cycle and the fate of "poor humanity." The quatrain goes like this:

> Ah! poor humanity! so frail, so fair,
> Are the fond visions of thy early day,

Till tyrant passion, and corrosive care,
Bid all thy fairy colours fade away!

The meaning here is pretty clear. People—"poor humanity"—are beautiful but frail. When they are young—that is, in "thy early day"—they are full of joy and hope. The reference here, at least in one way of thinking, is that children are full of happy anticipation about the life that lies before them. They have "fond visions" of a happy future. But that's only half of Smith's sentence. This sense of optimism lasts only until "tyrant passion" and "corrosive care" blasts all these youthful visions. The terms here are rather general, but, as we'll see, the circumstances of Smith's own life will help explain what she means. For the moment, we can just note the inescapable trajectory from "fond visions" to "tyrant passion and corrosive care," and that this seems to parallel the fading colors of the flowers described in the opening quatrains. Passion and care "Bid all thy fairy colours fade away."

And this takes us to the poem's punch line—the closing couplet.

Another May new buds and flowers shall bring:
Ah! why has happiness – no second Spring?

Okay, so I warned you that Smith's poems are often rather depressing. The poem ends with a question, but it seems to beg an answer: While the dying flowers will be revived in the coming Spring, human happiness is just snuffed out. The joy and beauty of youth will vanish, and there will be no "second Spring" to revive it. Bummer.

So now we have a good understanding of the poem's literal meaning and of its sonnet structure. But let's expand the context now and begin to grapple with the poem's place in its biographical and, ultimately, historical contexts. For starters, even a cursory glance at Smith's biography will provide one important level of significance.

Charlotte Turner was born into a relatively well-to-do family living at Bignor Park, an estate in the south of England. She describes her own childhood in idyllic terms—while she received a solid education and demonstrated a facility in writing at an early age, she also spent much of her time out doors, wandering through the meadows and along the river Arun, enjoying the beauty of nature. Unfortunately, the family fell into financial difficulties and, apparently in an effort to secure her future, the 15-year-old Charlotte was married off to one Benjamin Smith. The marriage was a disaster—Smith later referred to it as "legal prostitution." Benjamin Smith turned out to be a sometimes violent man who ran up huge debts (the couple actually had to spend time in France and then in debtors' prison trying to escape the bill-collectors). Eventually, they ended up living in a small apartment in Cheapside, an undesirable London neighborhood. It was in these very fallen circumstances that Charlotte was writing the poems for *Elegiac Sonnets*. Despite some assistance from her father-in-law, there was never enough money, Benjamin was less than useless as a husband, and the Smith family kept growing (Charlotte would eventually have 12 children!). Even an inheritance set up by Benjamin's father that was intended to support Charlotte and the kids was tied up in a legal dispute that lasted until well after

her death in 1806. I won't further go into the sad details, but suffice it to say that Smith's own life may well be reflected in the lines about "tyrant passion," "corrosive care," and lost happiness.

Smith's hard biography exemplifies the very real challenges facing women writers in the 18th century. She was effectively trapped in a bad marriage, divorce was not possible, and—though they were separated—her husband had legal rights to any of her earnings. As a result, though Smith considered herself to be a poet, she turned to writing fiction which made it at least possible to maintain herself and her children. She was, in fact, astonishingly prolific as a fiction writer, publishing several popular gothic novels. Still, she had every reason to complain bitterly—which does explicitly in her poem *The Emigrants*—about the very unequal treatment of women in a nation that prided itself on the fairness of its political and judicial institutions. I've included some links in the website to biographical resources about Smith, and I hope you'll have time to give them a look. For now, however, let me refocus the discussion on two key aspects of Smith's place in English literary history.

First, Smith is one of the poets typically included when literary historians talk about the so-called "Literature of Sensibility." This was an aesthetic, perhaps rhetorical mode that came into prominence in the late decades of the 18th-century, in part as a response to the satirical and philosophical work of the neoclassical writers like Alexander Pope. To get a sense of what's involved, one might simply ask: "What is the proper response of a reader to Smith's sonnet?" Clearly, the answer to that question doesn't involve a studied, philosophical appreciation of the poet's witty use of classical models (as could be the case with the neoclassical writers); neither does it expose the follies of human behavior (as the 18th-century satirists might do). Instead, the poem calls for an emotional response. When one gets to that final line—" Ah! why has happiness – no second Spring?"—the fitting reaction is perhaps a sigh, a shake of the head, and a sort of "ain't it the truth" lament about of the sadness inherent in the human experience. The literature of sensibility aims for exactly this sort of empathetic, emotional response. Reading such poetry should be an emotional experience, one that might foster a shared, communal compassion within its audience.

A second aspect of Smith's writing that deserves comment here is the close focus on the natural world. At the micro level, Smith is concerned with identifying the specific flowers that make up the springtime garland— anemonies, primroses, harebells, violets, and purple orchids. In some editions of Smith's work, the word "anemonies" even has a footnote identifying it more specifically as the "Anemony Nemeroso, the Wood Anemony." In other words, Smith, a near contemporary with Carl Linnaeus and Erasmus Darwin, was very much a student of the latest trends in scientific taxonomy, and this scientific interest is prominent in the precision of her poetic depictions of nature. At the macro level, note that the poem sets realm of nature—all the flowers, the seasonal renewal, and so on—against the realm of human endeavor—which Smith describes memorably as a space of "tyrant passion and corrosive care." Nature, in other words, offers an image of a more perfect, beautiful, and harmonious existence—a kind of ideal toward which we might aspire. In this respect, Smith's writing often prefigures the work of the more famous Romantic poets like Wordsworth who, following the lead of poets like Smith, developed a whole philosophy and aesthetic founded on the positive psycho-spiritual effects of nature on the human mind.

So there you have an introduction to Charlotte Smith, one of the finest, and certainly one of the most under-rated poets of the late 18th century. I hope you've found the discussion enlightening, and I hope especially that you'll explore more about the life and works of this remarkable woman. As always, you'll find another reading of the poem after the closing music. Many thanks for listening, and even more thanks for subscribing, to *Influential Lyrics*! See you next time for a look at William Wordsworth!

Further Reading

Knowles, Claire, comp. "Charlotte Smith." *The New Historia* < https://thenewhistoria.org/schema/charlotte-smith/ >. [Useful website providing overview of Smith and her work.]

Manning, Susan. "Sensibility." In *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830*, edited by Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee. Cambridge University Press, 2004, pages 80-99. [While not specifically about Smith's poetry, the essay offers an excellent overview of the "Literature of Sensibility."]

Smith, Charlotte. *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*. Ed. Stuart Curran. Oxford University Press, 1993. [Excellent collection of Smith's poems with a very useful biographical introduction by Stuart Curran.]

Smith, Charlotte. "Written at the Close of Spring," *Elegiac Sonnets*. HathiTrust, < https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hxg8ux&seq=19 >. [Facsimile of early edition of Smith's book.]

ETC....

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