

The Use of Poetry in *Horizon Zero Dawn*

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By Todd O. Williams

ABSTRACT

The videogame *Horizon Zero Dawn* contains many poems, which enrich the game through their thematic alignment with several of the game's major themes including nature, loss, and coping. More specifically, the poems resonate with the guiding statement the writers of *Horizon* followed by representing "love passed down across generations." Examining selected poems from the game reveals that *Horizon* functions as an elegy providing comfort for both personal and planetary losses.

Keywords: *Horizon Zero Dawn*, intertextuality, nature, loss, mourning, coping, poetry.

El uso de la poesía en *Horizon Zero Dawn*

RESUMEN

El videojuego *Horizon Zero Dawn* contiene muchos poemas que enriquecen el juego a través de su alineación temática con varios de los temas principales del juego, incluidos la naturaleza, la pérdida y el afrontamiento. Más específicamente, los poemas resuenan con la declaración de orientación que los escritores de *Horizon* siguieron al representar "el amor transmitido de generación en generación". El examen de los poemas seleccionados del juego revela que *Horizon* funciona como una elegía que brinda consuelo tanto para las pérdidas personales como planetarias.

Palabras clave: *Horizon Zero Dawn*, intertextualidad, naturaleza, pérdida, duelo, afrontamiento, poesía

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诗歌在《地平线：零之曙光》中的使用

摘要

视频游戏《地平线：零之曙光》里有许多诗歌，这些诗歌通过表达与包括自然、遗失、应对困境在内的几个主要游戏情节相一致的主题，进而升华了游戏体验。更具体地，诗歌通过展现“爱代代相传”，与游戏创作者的导语产生共鸣。通过分析游戏中的部分诗歌，揭示了这部游戏充当挽歌的角色，为个人和世界的遗失提供安慰。

关键词：《地平线：零之曙光》，互文性，自然，遗失，哀伤，应对，诗歌

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Winner of the 2018 Writers Guild Award for Best Video Game Writing, *Horizon Zero Dawn* is an exceptionally literary game. Since its release, reviewers have recognized the quality of its narrative and the depth of its story world. Andrea Phillips describes it as “among the freshest, most moving, most topical works of science fiction I’ve seen in years,” and goes on to argue that *Horizon* is a brilliant example of why the Hugo awards should have a games category. Casey Newton writes that the game “satisfied me in the way that a great novel does: compelling me to see the world through fresh eyes, and to reflect on how human nature can lead us both to breathtaking inventions and to ruin.” The game has also been the subject of recent scholarly works in literary journals such as Jesus Fernandez-Caro’s essay in the *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction*, and Janine Tobeck and Donald Jellerson’s article in *Arts*, in which they compare it to William Gibson’s novel *Pattern Recognition*. While the game’s narrative, world, and character development themselves achieve the level of a literary work, *Horizon* contains many works of literature, specifically poetry, within it that enrich the game through their alignment with several of its major themes.

Horizon’s protagonist Aloy can discover passages from over thirty different poems as she explores a post-apocalyptic earth 1,000 years in the future looking to recover the secrets of both her own mysterious origins and a history that has been lost to humanity. The vast majority of the poems in the game occur in the Metal Flowers that players can collect throughout the open world, but some are also included in Datapoints and one occurs during a conversation in the game’s DLC addition, *The Frozen Wilds*. These Metal Flowers and Datapoints are collectables that are not essential for the player to complete the game, but collecting them will vastly enhance the gaming experience. The Metal Flowers

are divided into three groups or Marks in the game. Mark I flowers contain Japanese Haiku; Mark II flowers contain poetry from throughout the near and far East; and the Mark III flowers contain British and American poetry from the 19th century, the focus of this essay. Each Mark has ten flowers listed A through J. The poems and fragments found in the Metal Flowers were selected by Ben McCaw, the game's Lead Writer and now the Narrative Director for the franchise. McCaw describes "nature" as the "primary thematic factor" for choosing the poems, which makes sense in a game that deals with ecological subject matter and contains an elaborate and beautiful visual depiction of natural landscapes. The game's creators also sought poems that covered "secondary themes" such as "war, loss, hope, and motherhood, among others" (McCaw). The poems found in *Horizon* reflect these themes, but also draw attention to their prominence in the game.

Loss stands out as a major secondary theme in *Horizon* and the most relevant to the game's poetry. Aloy is born into a matriarchal tribe called the Nora, but she is an outcast because she has no mother. This lack of a mother becomes an essential factor in her story. She loses her only parental figure, Rost, early in the game. Rost himself lost his wife and daughter to a mysterious band of murderous outsiders. The Nora tribe in general has suffered many recent losses during the Red Raids of the Carja tribe. As the player progresses through the game and its many side-quests, they meet numerous characters from various tribes who have suffered losses, usually at the hands of the previous Carja regime. Aloy's interactions with these characters frequently emphasize the importance of the mourning process and the effect of various coping mechanisms including rituals, beliefs, objects, and memorials.

In many ways, *Horizon* is a work of mourning and many of the game's poems deal specifically with loss and coping. The game blends these individual losses with larger-scale losses just as Aloy's individual mystery quest is tied in with the mystery of the world. The theme of broad environmental loss, for example, looms throughout *Horizon*. Aloy eventually learns that the old world was destroyed by the "Faro plague" when militarized AI robots designed by Ted Faro went rogue and devoured all human, animal, and plant life on earth. The player is encouraged to mourn humanity in the present as it heads toward self-destruction due to a propensity for war and for unchecked consumption of the natural environment. Many of the poems from the Metal Flowers are simply expressions of a poet's appreciation of the natural world, which serves an important function in encouraging the player to contemplate the value of what humanity is losing in the 21st century.

In addition, the poems are also rare artifacts of a human culture that has been almost entirely lost to Aloy's world. In the distant aftermath of complete environmental loss, the humans in *Horizon* struggle to survive a brutal, unadvanced, tribal existence. Thousands of years of human culture leading up to the Faro Plague has been almost entirely wiped out. Yet nature once again thrives largely due to another set of AI robots designed by Elisabet Sobeck to restore and maintain it. Players bear witness to the initial environmental cataclysm, which the natural world was eventually able to recover from, but they also see the cultural loss that comes with it. This cultural loss is evident in the landscape of *Horizon*. Urban areas of the early 2000s have become decayed remnants of buildings and stadiums covered over in plant growth. The game includes the remains of actual landmarks from the Mountain West region of the United States, showing players what the loss, and nature's reclamation, of their world might actual-

ly look like. This creates a visual and visceral experience of mourning similar to what is expressed in many of the game's poems. Yet like most poems of mourning, Aloy's world is not without hope because the heroic and compassionate actions of capable people are shown to make a significant difference.

The game concludes with Aloy saving her world, but along the way she also discovers that she is the clone of Sobeck who managed to restore life on earth at her own sacrifice through Project Zero Dawn. Thus, Sobeck provides a kind of mother to Aloy. The game's tie-ins with motherhood, and mourning and coping through creative acts recall Melanie Klein and Hanna Segal's psychoanalytic theories on art. The primal loss for all human beings is that of separation from the mother at birth where one leaves the perfect union, safety, and provision of the womb. Children and adults alike are always endlessly repairing this severed relationship especially through acts of love lest they fall prey to overwhelming grief or anger. To Klein, the creation of art is among the reparative acts, and creative reparation often occurs as a part of the mourning process (163). Hanna Segal takes Klein's premise further arguing that all works of art are in essence an expression of "this wish to restore and re-create" the primal, maternal relationship (187). The creation of art, according to this theory, is a process of mourning and repairing.

The link between mothers, mourning, and reparative actions, including creating art, arises throughout the game. Aloy lacks a primal relationship with a mother, for which she is cast out by the Nora, and she loses Rost, her stand-in mother, to the Shadow Carja early on in the game's narrative. She is essentially in mourning throughout the entire game and spends much of the game seeking her mother. Aloy's many acts of helping others during her quest are reparative acts done out of love, empathy, and altruism, but that also serve as her way

of coping with loss that might otherwise consume her with negative emotions. Fernandez-Caro argues that “Empathy stands as the key feature that defines Aloy” (51) and that Aloy “regards compassion as the best tool” for her project (54). Lauren Woolbright, likewise, sees the game as having a hopeful message based on Aloy’s “ethics of care.” Aloy’s quest ends not only with her preventing the loss of all life on earth, but with a recovery of her mother/creator, Sobeck, whose story she learns and whose grave she eventually finds. This recovery allows Aloy to cope with a primal lack/loss in herself that she has always experienced.

When McCaw and the game’s Narrative Director John Gonzalez accepted the 2018 Writers Guild Award they dedicated it to their late mothers. Gonzalez said that “[i]t is no coincidence that their sons went on to write an epic with a strong female protagonist, in which human love in general and maternal love in particular loom so large. We learned that from them.” The game itself served as something of a memorial for its creators with the theme of loving reparation highly visible throughout. Sobek does not only serve as a mother for Aloy, her clone, but her heroic act of love for humankind in creating Project Zero Dawn and preventing the total loss of life on earth makes her something of a mother to everyone and everything in Aloy’s future world. Thus, the poetry in the game is often not only about loss, but about hope and recovery. The writers working on *Horizon* used the following statement to guide their writing: “Life prevails over extinction because love passed down across generations is more powerful than any weapon system.” According to McCaw, when choosing poems for the Metal Flowers and elsewhere they “were looking for poems that resonated with that statement.” Many things are lost with time’s passage, but

much remains to compensate. The poems themselves might be viewed as objects of love passed down from previous generations.

With the open-world format of *Horizon*, a player could potentially miss most of the poems even if they were to watch every cut scene. While the poetry is not essential to playing and completing the game, it provides one of several aspects that reward exploring. As Gonzalez explains, “In this game, everything about the ancient world, especially everything that you’re going to find on the main quest, is directly relevant to Aloy’s story.” Andy Harthup writes that

Exploring it doesn’t reveal the world’s secrets, because they’re woven into the fabric of the game—progressing the smart story and actually taking part in the adventure is what opens up *Horizon*’s true beauty, like one of the Metal Flowers you’re tasked with collecting. The more tasks you accept, the more items you collect, the more you allow Aloy to learn about herself, the more meaning is imparted to the rest of the world.

The poems are only one part of the ancient world that Aloy discovers, and she does not spend a lot of time considering their contents and meanings as she is busy saving the world. For the player, however, the poems add another layer of meaning to the game. Along with providing verbal appreciations of nature that complement the game’s digitalized nature aesthetic, the poems also emphasize the roles of mourning and coping in the game.

“AMAZING GRACE”

In the first playable scenes of *Horizon*, Aloy has fallen into some underground ruins of the Old Ones. These ruins, the player will eventually come to understand, were a sub-facility of Project Zero Dawn where most of the staff ended up committing mass suicide via medical euthanasia to avoid a more violent imminent death at the hands of the approaching Faro Plague machines. Among the eight audio Data-points that can be scanned here is that of Mia Sayled who, as she is dying, half-sings and half-recites the sixth and final verse of the original version of the eighteenth-century hymn “Amazing Grace” by John Newton.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be for ever mine.

(qtd. in Turner 85-86; lines 21-24)

On choosing this verse, McCaw says, “We wanted something that someone might plausibly recite as a kind of prayer.” In this case poetry is used by the NPC as a tool for coping with the grief of her own impending death. In general, *Horizon* is not a pro-religion game. Aloy understandably tends to get annoyed by the religion of both the Nora who cast her out at birth for being “motherless” and the Carja with their history of committing atrocities in the name of their sun deity. Nevertheless, the game does have several moments when religion is shown to provide comfort for people and help them cope. McCaw says of the religious poetry included in the game, “Even though at times *Horizon* attacks religion, especially hypocritical versions of it, we wanted the game to convey a sense of secular spirituality. Aloy is, after all, in many ways a savior. Therefore we were very comfortable with including

poems with religious themes, as long as they weren't overbearing." While religion can lead to division and violence, the religious poetry in the game reminds players that it can also provide meaning and solace.

With its theme of redemption through divine grace and its expression of gratitude to God, "Amazing Grace" has a long history in America, where it is most popular, of providing spiritual comfort in times of difficulty. One prominent example of this occurred only a couple of years before *Horizon* came out when President Obama sang the song's first verse during the eulogy for the Charleston shooting victims. The song was frequently used in the aftermath of 9/11 during the previous decade. The most popular version of the song was released by Judy Collins and made it to #15 on the Billboard charts in 1971. Its mainstream appeal at that time is often attributed to its healing capacity that was welcome during this traumatic time period in American history.

While the song is very popular in America, this sixth verse of "Amazing Grace" from Newton's original 1772 composition has become somewhat obscure. The verse was initially omitted from influential late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth-century hymn collections put together by Ira Sankey and E. O. Excell, respectively. Excell's version of the song includes only the first three original verses and a fourth one that was added in 1852 by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a verse which Stowe adapted from another hymn. Excell's four verse version has remained the standard version of "Amazing Grace." This is the version that Collins sang and made even more popular in the early '70s (Turner 140-145). Interestingly, Newton's verse six was actually also included in the scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where Tom sings "Amazing Grace" as a way to transcend the abuse he suffers

as a slave (Stowe 445). However, according to McCaw, the *Horizon* writers were unaware of this connection.

The writers of *Horizon* were drawn to Newton's sixth verse "precisely because it was more obscure" (McCaw). Newton's largely suppressed sixth verse also fits the apocalyptic theme of the game more closely than what are now the standard verses of the song. In composing this sixth verse, Newton likely drew from the Bible verses 2 Peter 3:11-12: "[T]he heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with a fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (KJV). Verse six of "Amazing Grace" is specifically well suited for this moment in the game where Sayled is preparing not just for her own death, but the end of all life on earth due to the Faro Plague. These early Datapoints from the ruins create a sense of mystery in the game as the player and Aloy learn that something catastrophic has happened to the Old Ones, but they don't know what. The Sayled Datapoint works particularly well here because culturally "Amazing Grace" has been accepted as a reference for personal coping with death and tragedy, but also because the rarely used sixth verse correlates to the apocalyptic storyline that is slowly revealed as the player progresses further in the game.

LONGFELLOW AND DICKINSON

As circumstances have it, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow ended up being the most prominently featured poet in *Horizon* with three poems included. While he was the most famous American poet of his day, his critical reputation has suffered since and he is now overshadowed by figures like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. The two Metal Flowers containing Longfellow's "Flowers" and "Na-

ture” were actually originally intended to contain two Emily Dickinson poems. McCaw explains that when “there were issues with publishing rights,” the Dickinson poems were removed and “the Longfellow Metal Flower poems were added at that point.”

The Mark III G Metal Flower contains Longfellow’s “Flowers,” an early poem written in 1837 and published in his first volume, *Voices of the Night*. Though, one would hardly recognize it as a love poem, “Flowers” was originally presented as a gift for Francis Appleton, who would eventually become Longfellow’s wife in 1843. The poem takes its premise from an analogy that the famous German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe made about flowers being the stars of the earth. Longfellow writes of “When he [Goethe] called the flowers, so blue and golden,/Stars, that in earth’s firmament do shine” (lines 3-4). Longfellow claims that people can read the flowers much like astrologers read the stars. Of flowers he says,

Stars they are, wherein we read our history,
As astrologers and seers of eld;
Yet not wrapped about with awful mystery,
Like the burning stars, which they beheld.
(lines 5-8)

Common people, according to Longfellow, can find evidence of a divine creator and of that creator’s love for humanity by looking to the natural world and reading the flowers.

Wondrous truths, and manifold as wondrous,
God hath written in those stars above;
But not less in the bright flowerets under us
Stands the revelation of his love. (lines 9-12)

Humans from various cultures are accustomed to looking to the sky and the heavens as symbols of divinity. Longfellow

argues that we need not look any further than the earth itself. Flowers and all of the natural world contain evidence of the divine. This serves as another poetic example in the game of finding comfort through faith, but also sets up a contrast between finding the divine in the earth, like the matriarchal Nora tribe, versus in the sky, like the patriarchal Carja—a gendered division among religions that ecofeminists like Rosemary Radford Ruether have noted.

The Metal Flower only contains these first three verses of “Flowers” out of fifteen total. Longfellow goes on in the poem to discuss how “the Poet, faithful and far-seeing” (line 17) recognizes a common divinity between the flowers and humankind. He begins to anthropomorphize the flowers and attribute desire and wishes to them that he sees in himself. Longfellow discusses the ubiquity of flowers showing how they are found in different seasons and different places. The final three stanzas of the poem resonate with other themes from *Horizon*. Here Longfellow writes of flowers that “Speaking of the Past unto the Present,/Tell us of the ancient Games of Flowers” (lines 63-64). This specifically references the Olympic games of ancient times, but it ties in with the way the natural world of *Horizon* contains remnants of a past civilization, and how elements of nature, like flowers, provide a common connection between the past and the present. In the post-apocalyptic world, nature remains fundamentally unchanged. Flowers become, as Longfellow concludes the poem, “Emblems of our own great resurrection,/Emblems of the bright and better land” (lines 71-72). They point to a power beyond that of humanity, but one that humans can find hope in.

There is also a potential tie in with Sobeck in these final verses of the poem as she is, in a sense, resurrected as Aloy.

Sobeck's grave, which Aloy discovers during the game's epilogue, is surrounded by the same triangular pattern of flowers that surround each of the Metal Flowers. The triangle has traditionally been used in Christianity as a symbol of the Holy Trinity. Some fan theories on *Horizon* have speculated that the triangle may represent a kind of Holy Trinity within the *Horizon* universe where Sobeck would be the creator/father (or mother in this case). Aloy would be the son/daughter who acts as savior to the world. GAIA, the AI system of Project Zero Dawn, finally, would be the holy spirit. The game's writers appear to be aware of this dynamic. McCaw refers to Aloy as a savior (see above) and Sobeck is named after an Egyptian crocodile god of the Nile river.

"Flowers" is an unambiguously religious poem. Yet, *Horizon* has a complicated relationship with religion at best. Perhaps this is why the game includes another Longfellow poem in the Mark III A Metal Flower that provides something of a counter to the unquestioning faith expressed in "Flowers." Longfellow's sonnet simply entitled "Nature" was composed much later in his career. Written in 1876, when he was much closer to death, "Nature" is often considered a farewell poem in the tradition of Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" (see below). However, in contrast to Tennyson's self-elegy and to "Flowers," "Nature" views the prospect of an afterlife with uncertainty instead of faith.

The sonnet's octave opens with the image of a mother leading a child to bed at night. The child has broken some of their toys. As he goes to bed, the child remains unsure if the broken toys will be replaced by toys that he will like as much.

As a fond mother, when the day is o'er
Leads by the hand her little child to bed,

Half willing, half reluctant to be led,
And leaves his broken playthings on the floor,
Still gazing at them through the open door,
Nor wholly reassured and comforted
By the promises of others in their stead,
Which, though more splendid, may not
please him more[.] (lines 1-8)

Sonnets traditionally have a turn, or volta, which typically begins the final sestet of the fourteen-line poem. In his sestet, Longfellow turns from the maternal image—appropriate to *Horizon's* recurring theme of motherhood—to an analogous contemplation of nature. Here, he is not so much referring to the natural world of flora and fauna as he is contemplating the nature of life and death.

So Nature deals with us, and takes away
Our playthings one by one, and by the hand
Leads us to rest so gently, that we go
Scarce knowing if we wish to go or stay,
Being too full of sleep to understand
How far the unknown transcends the what
we know. (lines 9-14)

Like the child with the broken toys being led to bed by his mother, humans are led to the end of our lives by the laws of nature. As the child remains uncertain if the toys will be replaced by something preferable, people likewise cannot be sure if they will find recompense for the suffering and loss they experience in life, including the loss of life itself. Whereas “Flowers” is an expression of faith enhanced by evidence provided by nature, “Nature” is about the mystery of existence and points to the inadequacy of religion to provide absolute answers about what happens to people when they

die. The combination of these two poems by the same author suggest an ambiguity about spiritual matters similar to that found in *Horizon*.

According to McCaw, the Dickinson poems that were originally going to be used were the ones beginning “As imperceptibly as grief” and “To my quick ears the leaves conferred.” Like the Longfellow poems that ultimately replaced them, these poems set up a contrast where one is somewhat hopeful while the other is ambiguous at best. However, the Dickinson poems carry an internal consistency that would have brought something different to the game.

Written around 1865, “As imperceptibly as grief” personifies nature to create an elegy for summer and, by analogy, the speaker’s happiness and possibly also her life. The poem fits with *Horizon’s* themes of change occurring over time’s passage and the grief that often accompanies that change. Dickinson often wrote about nature’s cycles and transitions, especially to speculate on time and the eternal. The *Horizon* writers planned to include the following verses taken from Thomas Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd’s original 1890 edition of Dickinson’s poetry:¹

As imperceptibly as grief
 The summer lapsed away,—
 Too imperceptible, at last,
 To seem like perfidy.

A quietness distilled,
 As twilight long begun,
 Or Nature, spending with herself
 Sequestered afternoon.

The dusk drew earlier in,
 The morning foreign shone,—

A courteous, yet harrowing grace,
As guest who would be gone. (lines 1-12)

The poem contains imagery of the season passing and of the day coming to a close. Thus far the tone of the poem remains fairly ambiguous, particularly due to the juxtaposition of “courteous” and “harrowing.” Dickinson presents a sense of nature’s greatness and grandeur. Nature here is neither good nor evil, but indifferent in its ever-changing state. The writers of *Horizon* did not intend to include the fourth and final verse of the poem, which offers a positive final image in the face of grief:

And thus, without a wing,
Or service of a keel,
Our summer made her light escape
Into the beautiful. (lines 13-16)

The wings and the keel where the wing muscles attach are the parts of a bird’s anatomy that enable flight. Even lacking these things, summer was presumably able to soar and transcend into something beautiful. While less overtly hopeful and optimistic than Longfellow’s “Flowers,” the ending of Dickinson’s poem appears to symbolize some form of heavenly or at least aesthetic transcendence at the end of life or in the midst of grief, but, again, this verse was not to be included in *Horizon*.

Likely composed about a year earlier, “To my quick ear” offers no such image of beauty. *Horizon*’s writers intended to include this two-verse poem in its entirety.

To my quick ear the leaves conferred;
The bushes they were bells;
I could not find a privacy
From Nature’s sentinels.

In cave if I presumed to hide,
The walls began to tell;
Creation seemed a mighty crack
To make me visible. (lines 1-8)

This poem does not question an afterlife like Longfellow's "Nature," but only shows that one

cannot escape from the sound or view of ubiquitous nature—or, presumably, from its laws, including death. As with Longfellow's poem, nature in "To my quick ears" refuses to offer any assurances—romantic or religious. Likewise, "As imperceptibly as grief" presented as it would have been in *Horizon* with the final transcendent verse omitted displays a view of nature and its activity as simply ever present, not seeking humans, but unavoidably enveloping human existence. The game writers' elision of this verse implies that they wished to use Dickinson to portray an image of nature's overwhelming greatness and power, which contrasts the smallness of humankind. Several of the poems included in *Horizon* consider this contrast between human history and the much broader natural history. And yet, in the game humans do both destroy and then restore all of nature on earth. We can affect nature, but nature also follows its own path without us.

The one Longfellow poem that the game's writers did originally intend to include, "The Building of the Ship," occurs among the Datapoints found in GAIA Prime during The Mountain that Fell main quest. This Datapoint contains Sobeck's journal entry for 7-16-65, in which she mentions having received a message from the leader of Far Zenith that their Odyssey, a space colony meant to reestablish humanity on another planet, had launched. Sobeck records that she forwarded the message to the Alphas, the lead designers and im-

plementers of Zero Dawn, and received a reply from Naoto, the Alpha in charge of the terraforming system, DEMETER. Naoto is a lover of poetry and responds to Sobeck's message about the Odyssey with presumably the entire Longfellow poem. Sobeck says of the poem,

it's loooong, all right. I didn't read all of it, but it seems to be about launching a ship, rather than building one. This stanza (or couplet, or whatever) leapt out at me:

Humanity with all its fears,
With all its hope of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

Yeah, Odyssey and Zero Dawn both. Speaking of which, I should get back to ZD. Guess I should stop by Naoto's lab and check on DEMETER's progress, too. If I can get out of there without a volume of Tennyson pressed into my hands, I'll count myself lucky.²

Among other things, this Datapoint provides some explanation about the origin of the Metal Flowers. McCaw explains,

The idea behind the flowers is that the programmer behind the DEMETER subordinate function of GAIA collects nature poetry, and so the AI honors her by inserting poems into the Metal Flowers. We used the stanza from "The Building of the Ship" because it seemed to fit so well with the concept of the Odyssey/Far Zenith. We also hoped that data point would provide

a clue about the origin of the poems in the Metal Flowers.

Players learn more about these origins in a few other places. In her conversation with the AI CYAN in the *Frozen Wilds* DLC, Aloy mentions the Metal Flowers that have poems coded in them. CYAN suggests that the creator of the flowers is one of the terraforming subfunctions of GAIA. The player learns from the Carja Merchant Kudiv in the Carja capital of Meridian that the Metal Flowers began to appear around the same time as the Derangement when GAIA self-destructed and her subordinate functions became independent. CYAN suggests, “The presence of foliage leads me to consider the terraforming system[.] ... Maybe one whose purview is flora.” This would, of course, be the system DEMETER. CYAN tells Aloy that the only way the poetry “could have made it into such a system is through its programmer.” CYAN’s own programmer, Dr. Sandoval, “uploaded a great deal of literature to test [CYAN’s] emotional responses.” Perhaps GAIA was uploaded with poetry by Sobeck for the same purpose, or, perhaps the poetry was directly uploaded to DEMETER by Naoto.

The lines from “The Building of the Ship” that Sobeck makes note of do indeed fit extremely well with the concept of the Odyssey in *Horizon*. However, they have some relevant historical significance, as well. Longfellow’s most noteworthy topical poem, “The Building of the Ship” was written in 1849 as an allegory about an America that was heading toward a Civil War, which would actually occur a dozen years later. The ship of the poem’s title is called The Union. Built of wood from both Maine and Georgia, it is clearly meant to represent the union of the states that make up America. During his presidency, Abraham Lincoln once quoted these same

lines of Longfellow's that Sobeck mentions. Apparently, he was so moved by them he wept and praised Longfellow, "It is a wonderful gift to be able to stir men like that!" (Dana 213). Decades later, President Roosevelt sent these lines to Winston Churchill during World War II. Churchill was so inspired by them that he had them framed and he read the poem over the radio for inspirational purposes (Dana 214; Shribman). While the poem's context does not specifically match the situation in *Horizon*—it is not a civil war and there is actually more at stake than maintaining a unified nation—these lines excerpted from Longfellow's poem have been evoked in times of great historical challenges to humanity. Trying to preserve our species in the face of the Faro Plague certainly qualifies.

THOREAU

While Henry David Thoreau never established himself among the great American poets, he is without a doubt the American writer who is most associated with nature writing, so it is not surprising to find his works within the Metal Flowers. He is best known for his Transcendentalist prose masterpiece *Walden*, based on the two years he spent from 1845 to 1847 living alone in the woods at Walden pond in his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. The two poems by Thoreau found in Metal Flowers Mark III B and H, however, come from his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, published in 1849. Mostly composed during the time he lived at Walden, *A Week* describes a journey that Thoreau took with his beloved brother, John, up the Merrimack river to the White Mountains of New Hampshire during the summer of 1839. Thoreau's biographer Laura Dassow Walls describes their trip as the "adventure of a lifetime" (102). Tragically, John would die of lockjaw in Thoreau's arms a few years later in January of 1842. A

Week was written largely as a memorial to John. The writers of *Horizon* found the book's function as a memorial "appealing in light of the game's thematic focus on loss" (McCaw). The theme of loss expressed through imagery of nature and time runs throughout both *Horizon* and *A Week*.

The way Thoreau approaches the landscape in *A Week* is similar to the way Aloy must approach it—to uncover the mysteries of the world and her role in it. *A Week* is not a straightforward travel journal but a hybrid text with many digressions. The actual trip Thoreau took with his brother, in fact, took two weeks, which were condensed into one, so the book's purpose is clearly not accuracy. Linck Johnson writes that the "voyage is less the subject of the book than the occasion for an extended meditation on the flux of time and the ever-flowing rivers" (xvi). One of the things that Thoreau was most interested in was the changes in the land that took place over time especially as Native American culture was overtaken by the industrialism of the white settler colonizers, or as technology and industry were encroaching on the natural habitat. Elizabeth Hall Whitherell explains Thoreau's writing strategy: "Typically, the identification of a particular site triggers an exploration of its history or of associations it evokes ... [.] These journeys of the imagination are undertaken both to explore man's nature ... and to demonstrate the timelessness at the heart of change, the eternal cycle underlying the ever-shifting appearances of the physical world" (x). Like Aloy and others in *Horizon*, Thoreau seeks to better understand the present through the history of the land, which he learns through books, but more importantly, through observation.

Both *Horizon* and *A Week* demonstrate how humankind constantly interacts with and leaves its mark on the natural world. Furthermore, both texts show how humans read the physical

remains of the past in our surroundings and try to make sense of them. In *Horizon*, this is sometimes through mythologizing such as when the Nora view the Eleuthia-9 ruin as their All-Mother who defeated the Metal Devil, which is actually the remnant of one of Faro's Horus Titan machines. During the Wednesday chapter of *A Week*, Thoreau goes into a long discussion of ancient ruins where he includes a remarkable 14-line poem that says of the natural landscape, "This is my Carnac" (line 1). He points to flowers blooming and sees "the spirit of time" in them, in "This present day" (lines 8-9).

Three thousand year ago are not agone,
They are still lingering in the summer morn,
And Memnon's Mother sprightly greets us now,
Wearing her youthful radiance on her brow.
(252; lines 9-12)

The ancient Greek goddess of the dawn still arises every morning in the present day. As with *Project Zero Dawn*, the earth is ever renewed. Thoreau's lines express how the natural world of today is essentially that of the past, and how nature can connect people with and teach them about the past in the same way that ancient ruins do. This poem would have fit in well among the Metal Flowers.

The way poetry is used in *Horizon* is also similar to how Thoreau uses and discusses it in *A Week*. Thoreau's original poems and poems by others are presented as supplements to the main text often to reiterate something discussed in the prose, much like the Metal Flowers are not integral to the main story of *Horizon* but reiterate its themes and tone. More relevant are Thoreau's discussions of poetry. Brian Gazaille has demonstrated how Thoreau makes comparisons between physical relics and poems in *A Week*, "a technique that compels readers to unearth both material wrecks and literary

relics from the body of Thoreau's text—to assert deeper correspondences between them” (454). Past poets describing nature or presenting truths throughout history provide relics from the past that remain relevant in the present. Gazaille explains, “Thoreau's explicit comparisons of poetic and natural antiquities suggest that just as nature integrates decomposing matter into other organisms and geological structures, *A Week* absorbs and presents in new forms pieces of the literary past” (477). One could replace *A Week* in that last phrase with *Horizon* as the game presents poems of the past within an entirely new context within which players are to consider them. Gazaille writes of *A Week*, “The book's intertextuality thus encourages readers to assemble fragments that have lost their original luster to the corrosive effects of time ... [.] Thoreau hopes that the creative readers of today will make the ‘skeletons’ of perennial truths acquire new ‘flesh and blood’ in the present” (478). Thoreau writes in the Sunday chapter, “Indeed, the best books have a use like sticks and stones, which is above or beside their design ... [.] Even Virgil's poetry serves a very different use to me to-day from what it did to his contemporaries” (90). Likewise, the intertextual strategy through which *Horizon* presents poetry and recontextualizes it within the game demonstrates that relics, including literary relics, can both provide a connection to the past and take on new relevance within the present or, in the case of the game, within an imagined future. In this way, both *A Week* and *Horizon* demonstrate the vitality of poetry by linking it with time and nature.

Thoreau's focus on time and nature in *A Week* is also consistent with his elegiac tone. Around the same time that his brother John died, Thoreau's friend Ralph Waldo Emerson lost his son Waldo Jr. to scarlet fever. In a letter to Emerson on that occasion, Thoreau writes “Nature ... finds her own

again under new forms without loss[.] ... Every blade in the field—every leaf in the forest—lays down its life in its season as beautifully as it was taken up” (qtd. in Walls 130). Similarly, in the final, Friday chapter of *A Week*, he writes, “There is something even in the lapse of time by which time recovers itself” (351). Thoreau takes comfort in the way nature connects the past, present, and future by always renewing itself as he copes with the loss of his brother. Johnson describes *A Week* as “an ambitious pastoral elegy in which [Thoreau] sought to assuage his grief over the death of his brother John, a traumatic loss that informs Thoreau’s meditations on transience and permanence and helps to account for the various patterns of growth, decay, and renewal elaborated in *A Week*” (xix). In *Horizon*, players mourn the loss of the old earth, but also bear witness to a beautiful, albeit dangerous, new world that has recovered itself. Here, as in the pastoral elegy, the loss and renewal of nature over time provides a way of understanding and coping with individual losses.

While it is extraordinary how well *A Week* parallels *Horizon* with Aloy’s discovery of the past, the game’s elegiac tone, and its intertextual use of poetry, the two poems selected for the Metal Flowers do not emphasize any of these things. *Horizon*’s invocation of *A Week* is perhaps more interesting than the actual poetry excerpts selected. The Mark III H poetic excerpt, which comes from the second chapter of *A Week*, the Sunday chapter, is a love poem that Thoreau wrote for Mary Russell. Russell was a friend of the Emersons. Thoreau met her in 1841 and later that year sent her a poem entitled “To the Maiden in the East” in a letter. It was published the following year in the short-lived Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*. Nothing romantic came of Thoreau’s flirtation with Russell; they remained friends and she married someone else a few years later in 1846.

The poem occurs, somewhat awkwardly, in *A Week* during the morning of the second day of the brothers' journey. They awaken to experience a moment of profound spirituality in nature on this Sunday morning. Thoreau writes, "The stillness was intense and almost conscious, as if it were a natural Sabbath, and we fancied that the morning was the evening of a celestial day" (46). Spiritual nature is favorably contrasted here with Christianity on this sabbath morning. Thoreau expresses the wish that all of life could be as "impressive" as this moment. Then, through some associative logic, he comes to mention a maiden who once sailed in his boat and says that the evening stars "seem but this maiden's emissaries and reporters of her progress" (47). Here the poem occurs in *A Week* without its title. *Horizon* includes only the first verse of this six-verse poem.

Low in the eastern sky
 Is set thy glancing eye;
 And though its gracious light
 Ne'er riseth to my sight,
 Yet every star that climbs
 Above the gnarled limbs
 Of yonder hill,
 Conveys thy gentle will. (47; lines 1-8)

The eye in the sky appears to be a combination of the rising sun and Russell's gaze. Though they are separated, Thoreau finds a connection between himself and Russell across space through nature.³ Thoreau's tone in the poem is one of resignation over his unrequited love rather than one of wooing. He receives her "gentle will" toward him even though the "gracious light" of her gaze does not rise to his sight. The remainder of the poem continues with this expression of mutual goodwill rather than the pain of unrequited love. The wind

brings “Thy kindest wishes, through./As mine they bear to you” (lines 11-12). As the poem concludes, the speaker will contentedly continue on his journey as if she were with him and for her sake. Other than including nature imagery and some imagery of traveling by boat at the end, the connection to the broader narrative of *A Week* is rather weak, but such digressions and rough transitions are typical of Thoreau’s first book. The poem is followed by Thoreau shifting somewhat abruptly to his thoughts on the reflective quality of the water they are traveling on. How the poem as a whole fits with *Horizon* is questionable, but taken out of context the opening verse does contain imagery of a horizon and love conveyed across space if not across time.

Metal Flower Mark III B contains the seventh and eighth out of ten verses from a poem Thoreau includes fairly early on in the penultimate Thursday chapter of *A Week*. In this chapter the two brothers reach their destination of Concord, New Hampshire and ascend Mount Washington, the goal of the journey, before returning home to Concord, Massachusetts. The transition from prose text to poem is much smoother here. The brothers awaken to a rainy morning. This leads Thoreau to discuss his appreciation of nature, the rain in particular, and compare it favorably to book learning. He writes, “A day passed in the society of those Greek sages, such as described in the Banquet of Xenophon, would not be comparable with the dry wit of decayed cranberry vines, and the fresh Attic salt of the moss-beds” (300). As he sits in the rain he asks, “What were the amusements of the drawing room and the library in comparison, if we had them here?” (301). This is followed by a poem dealing with this exact topic.

In the first half of the poem the speaker passes on reading Homer, Shakespeare, and Plutarch while he sits in the

rain. The second half of the poem shifts to a description of surrounding nature during the rain. *Horizon* includes the following verses:

And now the cordial clouds have shut all in,
And gently swells the wind to say all's well,
The scattered drops are falling fast and thin,
Some in the pool, some in the flower-bell.

I am well drenched upon my bed of oats;
But see that globe come rolling down its stem,
Now like a lonely planet there it floats,
And now it sinks into my garment's hem.
(302; lines 25-32)

The simile of the water dropping from the flower onto his clothes like a lonely planet captures nature at both its micro and macro levels. This poem is primarily a straightforward appreciation of nature. The final two remaining verses describe how the speaker, Thoreau, prefers the rain to the sun. There remains something of the elegiac here, however. Thoreau was very aware of his rapidly changing world. He laments shortly after this poem, "This generation has come into the world fatally late for some enterprises. Go where we will on the *surface* of things, men have been there before us" (303). Walls describes *A Week* as not only an elegy for John, but "for the world they'd shared together, which was swiftly passing away" (196). In the context of *A Week* and *Horizon*, poems of simple environmental appreciation implicitly express mourning for what humanity has lost of the earth and what they are currently in the process of losing.

VICTORIAN ELEGIAC

During her conversation with CYAN, the AI that Aloy rescues in *The Frozen Wilds*, Aloy mentions the poems she's found encoded within the Metal Flowers. CYAN responds by reciting verses from a favorite poem of hers:

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar. (lines 9-12)

Students of Victorian poetry will quickly recognize this as the ending of Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." Tennyson was largely known for mastering the genre of elegy with his most famous poem being the extensive elegy for his childhood friend Arthur Hallam, *In Memoriam A. H. H.* He wrote "Crossing the Bar" in 1889 as a kind of self-elegy after recovering from a severe rheumatoid illness earlier that year; though, he would live for three more years after its completion. While Tennyson at times questions the afterlife and even expresses despair in his elegiac writings, this poem portrays a faithful, serene Tennyson ready to peacefully leave the world. Upon hearing "Crossing the Bar," Tennyson's son Hallam reportedly said, "That is the crown of your life's work" (Ricks 295). This was not the last poem Tennyson wrote, but it is always the last poem in any edition of Tennyson's collected poetry as per his deathbed request.

"Crossing the Bar" relies on a metaphor where death is conceptualized as a journey out to sea. The poem's title refers to

leaving a harbor. CYAN omits the first two verses of the poem where Tennyson essentially wishes to feel content during his time of dying, envisioning it as a return home. In the final verse, he wishes for no sadness and expresses the desire, the hope, to meet God. CYAN clearly does not have any spiritual beliefs, but perhaps she likes these verses because she misses her original ‘Pilot’ or programmer, Dr. Sandoval, from whom she has been separated for hundreds of years. Perhaps it is because her own existence as a sophisticated AI had recently been threatened by HEPHESTUS. CYAN also expresses grief for the loss of Ourea, the character who sacrificed herself to free CYAN.

The other Tennyson poem from *Horizon* appears in the Mark III F Metal Flower. It is a far less famous poem than “Crossing the Bar,” but “A Farewell” has a similar self-elegiac tone and similar sea imagery; though, it was written much earlier in his career. The poem was published in Tennyson’s 1842 edition but was likely written several years before. Tennyson certainly would have had Arthur Hallam’s 1833 death in mind when he wrote this poem. One likely date for the poem would be 1837 when Tennyson was moving from, or saying farewell to, his home in Somersby. The imagery of “A Farewell” suggests the brooks around Somersby that recur throughout Tennyson’s poetry.⁴ McCaw says of the poem: “‘A Farewell’ fit perfectly with our themes of loss and love, especially over the passage of time.” The Metal Flower contains only the final three of the poem’s four verses. The poem in its entirety reads,

Flow down, cold rivulet, to the sea,
 Thy tribute wave deliver;
 No more by thee my steps shall be,
 For ever and for ever.

Flow, softly flow, by lawn and lea,
A rivulet, then a river;
Nowhere by thee my steps shall be,
For ever and for ever.

But here will sigh thine alder-tree,
And here thine aspen shiver;
And here by thee will hum the bee,
For ever and for ever.

A thousand suns will stream on thee,
A thousand moons will quiver;
But not by thee my steps shall be,
For ever and for ever. (lines 1-16)

“A Farewell” lacks the hopefulness of “Crossing the Bar.” Death is presented here in a very matter-of-fact manner. The poem reflects on the limits of a human life in comparison with the rest of the natural world. When the speaker is dead and gone, the rivulet, the river, the sea; along with the grass, the trees, and the insects, will continue on for many years. That is, unless they are all devoured by something like the Faro Plague. Even then, as the final verse reminds readers, the sun and moon will continue for millions of more years, though human life is brief and fleeting. Of course, in our contemporary era of environmental destruction, humans are beginning to realize that the natural world itself cannot be taken for granted. The poem speaks to the way the natural world has a past and a future that goes far beyond one human being’s existence, which is a major theme of *Horizon*.

Another Victorian poem that fits these themes and uses similar imagery can be found in the Mark III C Metal Flower. George Meredith’s “Dirge in the Woods” comes from his

1888 volume *A Reading of Earth*. Meredith is best known as a novelist and for his long poem *Modern Love*, which portrays the end of a marriage, but he turned largely to nature poetry later in his career. McCaw cites “Dirge in the Woods” as one of his two favorite poems from the game. His other favorite was Basho Matsuo’s short, haiku-style poem from Mark I—“Summer Grasses:/ all that remains/ of soldier’s dreams”—which, McCaw says, “perfectly conveys our vision of a post-apocalyptic world reclaimed by nature—and does so in only eight words!” Meredith’s poem, likewise, conveys nature’s resilience in displaying how, by design, death can clear the way for later life to flourish. The death associated with the Faro Plague devastated the earth, but we see how Project Zero Dawn was able to reset the natural world in response. “Dirge in the Woods” shows not only that nature reclaims the earth, as does the Matsuo poem, but it shows the natural process of how this reclamation occurs.

“Dirge in the Woods” is included in its entirety in *Horizon*:

A Wind sways the pines,
And below
Not a breath of wild air;
Still as the mosses that glow
On the flooring and over the lines
Of the roots here and there.
The pine-tree drops its dead;
They are quiet, as under the sea.
Overhead, overhead
Rushes life in a race,
As the clouds the clouds chase;
And we go,
And we drop like the fruits of the tree,

Even we,
Even so. (lines 1-15)

Meredith's poem carries a similar stark tone about death as several other poems from *Horizon*. In its natural setting, the wind and the clouds overhead are both representative of life, but the wind also acts as a force of death causing the pine trees to drop their dead branches and cones to the still ground. Likewise, the indifferent forces of life and death will eventually lead to our demise as individual humans. Renate Muendel explains, "human transience is part of the same large process that makes the tree quietly release its fruit" (35). There is a glimmer of hope in this poem since the seeds that fall from the pines may grow into new trees. Individual lives end, a simple truth, but nature has a way of reproducing itself as we see in the post-apocalyptic landscape of *Horizon*.

One final Victorian poem is found in Metal Flower Mark III D: Charlotte Brontë's "Life." Surprisingly, for such a pro-feminist game, this is the only one of all of the Metal Flowers poems that was written by a woman.⁵ Charlotte was the eldest of the three Brontë sisters. While she is most well known for her novel *Jane Eyre*, she also wrote poetry originally under the pseudonym Currer Bell. Her poem "Life" deals specifically with themes of death and coping. Though, one might not grasp this based on the excerpt included in the game. *Horizon* only reproduces the first eight of the poem's twenty-four lines:

Life, believe, is not a dream
So dark as sages say;
Oft a little morning rain
Foretells a pleasant day.
Sometimes there are clouds of gloom,

But these are transient all;
If the shower will make the roses bloom,
O why lament its fall? (lines 1-8)

This excerpt captures the idea of constant change occurring in nature. It offers a generally positive take on these changes as the rain and clouds will move on and nourish the flowers that will eventually bloom. Later lines in the poem make the theme of death more overt by asking, “What though Death at times steps in,/And calls our Best away?” (lines 13-14). The poem provides comfort to the bereaved by showing that death and sorrow are a part of life—part of the natural order of things. Loss and grief are always there, “Yet Hope again elastic springs” (line 17). The later verses of the poem, not included in the game, contain a contemplation of death like the other two Victorian poems from the *Metal Flowers*. Brontë’s poem, however, takes a more hopeful and courageous approach to the subject by emphasizing positive aspects of life.

While the casual player might only recognize the poems within *Horizon* as simple pieces of nature poetry, the writers’ intertextual use of poems can greatly enrich the game’s treatment of several key themes—loss and coping being the most prominent. The nature poems from *Horizon* emphasize the guiding principle for the game’s writers that life prevails because of “love passed down across generations.” Nature itself links human beings to all of the human life lived before, even if, like those in Aloy’s world, they are otherwise cut off from their history. Poetry also connects people to the past lives of others who have experienced loss and beauty and everything else life offers. This connection to all of life and all of creation can help people cope as they inevitably face losses throughout their lives like so many characters in *Horizon* do. The game’s inclusion of poetry enables players to fully appreciate

Horizon as an elegy—a story about the loss of our planet and about many personal losses, but also providing the comfort of imagining that nature and humanity will survive as long as people have love for them and the courage to persevere.

My deepest gratitude to Guerrilla Games and to Ben McCaw, in particular, for taking the time to answer my questions about the use of poetry in the game.

NOTES

- 1 Harvard UP controls permissions to Dickinson's work. However, the versions of Dickinson's poetry from the Todd and Higginson edition are now in the public domain according to the Emily Dickinson Museum's webpage.
- 2 With all of her intelligence, it is difficult to accept that Sobeck wouldn't be able to figure out that the stanza above was obviously not a couplet. It is also strange that she would have read up to these lines, which are nearly at the end of this fairly long poem, without just finishing it.
- 3 This is somewhat problematic within the narrative of *A Week* as Thoreau had not met Russell at the time of his journey so he could not have been thinking of her in the actual moment.
- 4 See, for example, "The Brook," "Ode to Memory," and parts of *In Memoriam*.
- 5 Regarding this, McCaw explains, "I wanted to use more female poets, especially Dickinson, but we were limited because we could only use work in the public domain. This factor made it impossible to use more recent poetry in general."

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