

# *Fight Me, the Romantics Would Have Loved Emo*

## *Music*

By Aurora Dimitre

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *GET UP KIDS. DON'T WAIT. IF FURTHER SEEMS FOREVER* it's because of *THE PLACES YOU HAVE COME TO FEAR THE MOST*. Dimitre's thesis that Keats, Byron, Shelley and Coleridge would have some kind of *CHEMICAL ROMANCE* with Emo is like *A FEVER YOU CAN'T SWEAT OUT* but *WAIT*, pull the black bangs out of your starry teenage eyes and *KNOW* any poet with *A MARK, A MISSION, A BRAND, A SCAR* on the *BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS* does no hip-jive but *FEELS* so entropic anthems is *WHERE YOU WANT TO BE* with other *ALL AMERICAN REJECTS* on a Grecian vase with *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* because she even includes footnotes and *F\*\*\*ING, RESEARCHES* her stuff! Was it Byron/ Colbain who burst into teary flames as the *DIRTY LITTLE SECRET* grew near thus *YOU ARE WHERE YOU WANT TO BE* because 'I have learned to love despair!' As essays go, we think it's Nirvana.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *As someone who desperately wanted to be emo in middle school but had the misfortune of growing up in rural North Dakota, and someone who grew up to be an English major in college, there was no way I was going to learn about the Romantics and not connect them with emo music my friend who cried all the time listened to in the study hall. This, mixed with I can do whatever I want with my writing (thanks, Anthrax-the-thrash-metal-band-from-the-80s-that-does-whatever-they-want) pushed me to looking farther into the similarities. And that pushed me to sit down and pound it out. As someone who got an English degree, there's a pretension in a lot of liberal arts majors that tend to look down on things like emo music, heavy metal, bad horror stories and terribly written (but fun!) books—and you can enjoy Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Pierce the Veil, because, in the end, humanity shows through in all art, and just because one is currently seen as superior doesn't necessarily mean that it is.*

**BIO:** Aurora Dimitre is a young author from North Dakota. She likes heavy metal music and Keanu Reeves. Her work has appeared in *North Dakota Living, Plainsong* and *Angry Old Man Magazine*.

“A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity.<sup>1</sup>”—is this a description of emo music, or a line out of a poem by William Blake about rape? I mean, it is a line out of a poem by Blake, the footnote will tell you that much, but it is also pretty much a good description of emo music of the late 2000s, which, like most Romantic poetry, focuses pretty implicitly on the inner self, feeling, and how this all affects us. Take this line from Hawthorne Heights’s “Dead in the Water”: “She’s a ghost, a silhouette calling out my name.”<sup>2</sup> or this line from My Chemical Romance’s “I’m Not Okay (I Promise)”: “What will it take to show you / It’s not the life it seems.”<sup>3</sup> or from Pierce the Veil’s “Caraphernelia”: “Hold my heart, it’s beating for you anyway.”<sup>4</sup> Hawthorne Heights, My Chemical Romance, and Pierce the Veil are just a few of the many emo bands that rose to power in the late 2000s/early 2010s, a time that I like to refer to as ‘The Emo Renaissance,’ but just a couple of handpicked lines from their songs pulls out that image of these eyeliner’d up men (and women! Amy Lee, where you at?) who wore their hair in their face, screaming into the void.

This is not the first time I’ve thought that the romantics would love emo music—every time I learn anything about Percy Shelley, the fact that he’s just about as 2008-emo as Prince Hamlet really speaks words to me. And when talking about emos and the Romantics, Mary Shelley’s got to be mentioned, because she’s about half an Evanescence song away from being the gothest girl that’s ever lived; according to urban legend, girl lost her virginity on her

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<sup>1</sup> “Visions of the Daughters of Albion,” William Blake, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling.

<sup>2</sup> <https://genius.com/Hawthorne-heights-dead-in-the-water-lyrics>

<sup>3</sup> <https://genius.com/My-chemical-romance-im-not-okay-i-promise-lyrics>

<sup>4</sup> This is a line that every emo kid definitely had scrawled on their Converse. I know this because every time I hear it I have to resist the urge to scrawl it on my Converse.

mother's grave, and that is super metal. But even beyond that, emo music is pretty much the voice of the modern Romantic.

The subject matter is not exactly the same; the Romantics could be very focused on things like the French Revolution and the overbearing church and how they related in reference to that; something that really puts them more on par with 'modern' (modern being a relative term, of course; even emo at this point is pretty dated, even though some emo bands have been continuously putting out new stuff) pop-punk than 'modern' emo music, but you're insane if you don't think that the speaker of Green Day's "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" (a song that makes Green Day waver between pop-punk and emo; they are usually pretty solidly pop-punk) is not a Byronic hero, the song opens with "I walk a lonely road, the only road that I have ever known."<sup>5</sup> As well as this, Black Veil Brides, who are pretty commonly accepted as an emo band<sup>6</sup>, have a song titled "Wake Up" that pulls from a lot of these themes, so there is some overlap.

Overall, though, while pop-punk lyrics might have more in common with the academic definition of a Romantic, it's emo that's the soul. Vic Fuentes wailing about heartbreak really screams Samuel Taylor Coleridge to me more than Mark Hoppus complaining about how he doesn't like his dad. There is a big overlap between emo and pop-punk; each of them really have a distinct sound (emo is the lovechild of pop-punk and screamo, really), emo tends to be more emotion-focused and pop-punk tends to be more rebellion-focused (hence the punk part; it's a lot less rebellion-against-society than the Sex Pistols, but Good Charlotte does have some stuff to say about how the world works), and you always have those bands that straddle the middle, like All Time Low and Mayday Parade, who confuse the genre pool even more when they feature

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<sup>5</sup> I didn't actually have to look this one up because every self-respecting emo or emo-wannabe would know the first line of "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" just as they would flinch a little bit when the "Welcome to the Black Parade" G-note is played on a piano.

<sup>6</sup> Sadly, Black Veil Brides is no more, but their lead singer still makes music. He looks and sounds like a David Bowie who decided to be emo.

Vic Fuentes<sup>7</sup>. All Time Low is too happy-sounding to be emo, really<sup>8</sup>, but then they've got lyrics like "And I'm so sick of watching the minutes pass as I go nowhere"<sup>9</sup>, which is decidedly more wistful-emo than pissed-off-pop-punk.

I'm mentioning Fuentes a lot, and that's because I think he's got the real emo voice. That's another big thing about the emo genre, is that it *wails*—which is, of course, where All Time Low confuses itself more, because Alex Gaskarth doesn't have that wail, which should be a massive outpouring of emotion that really rejects what else was popular at the time; the ultra dance-y, ultra-pop-y; ultra-bubblegum: Britney Spears, Ke\$ha, late boy bands. Vic Fuentes might look like a young, Mexican Jason Lee, but he's got a shaky tenor that breaks into a hard emo scream at the drop of a hat. The poem "Hatred and Vengeance, My Eternal Portion" (which, by the way, has just about the most emo title I've ever heard) by William Cowper (not technically a Romantic, but an influencer) can be edited into a Pierce the Veil song very, very easily. The emo genre is a push-back against not feeling your emotions. It's a push-back against brushing your teeth with a bottle of Jack<sup>10</sup>.

But you can't learn about Percy Shelley and tell me that he wouldn't love My Chemical Romance. It just happens to be that poets living in a slightly oppressive century had a lot more serious things going on than people in a band in the 2000s. So while it is true that the Romantics do have more thematically in-line with the punk movement (and I mean all versions of the punk movement: original punk, grunge, post-punk, pop-punk, all of it), they've got that deep emotional line like bands like Pierce the Veil or Bullet for My Valentine have; it's just connected to different things. There's a lot more Romantic in Vic Fuentes or Amy Lee wailing than Mark

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<sup>7</sup> All Time Low's "Love Like War" and Mayday Parade's cover of "Somebody That I Used To Know"

<sup>8</sup> Or maybe it's just Alex Gaskarth's happy puppy-dog face he makes when he sings; I could be one hundred percent swayed by that. He just always looks like he's having a great time.

<sup>9</sup> "Weightless," All Time Low, <https://genius.com/All-time-low-weightless-lyrics>

<sup>10</sup> To paraphrase Ke\$ha.

Hoppus or Deryck Whibley (who... also sometimes runs emo) yelling, even if the wailing is about a romantic relationship and the yelling is about breaking free to do what they want. Pop-punk and emo are very closely tied (as I've mentioned; there are those bands that straddle the line; All Time Low, Sum-41, The All-American Rejects...), but it's that extra note of emotion that makes emo more Romantic than pop-punk. Pop-punk is angry in a way that emo isn't<sup>11</sup>, and... while the case can be said for both genres, pop-punk is *whiney*.

The case can be made that emo is whiney, too, don't get me wrong. But the way that the lyrics are written in an emo song versus how they're written in a pop-punk song make emo sound more important. Emo music uses more metaphors, more flowery language; they're more concerned with form. Emo lyrics are more poetry than pop-punk. As an example:

“What if I can't forget you?  
I'll burn your name into my throat  
I'll be the fire that'll catch you  
What's so good about picking up the pieces?  
None of the colors ever light up anymore in this hole”<sup>12</sup>

versus, some pop-punk:

“Storming through the party like my name was El Niño  
When I'm hangin' out drinking in the back of an El Camino  
As a kid, I was a skid and no one knew me by name  
Trashed my own house party 'cause nobody came.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pop-punk is pissed off; when emo gets mad, emo is the kind of rage that precedes death.

<sup>12</sup> “Caraphernelia”, Pierce the Veil, <https://genius.com/Pierce-the-veil-caraphernelia-lyrics>

<sup>13</sup> “Fat Lip”, Sum-41, <https://genius.com/Sum-41-fat-lip-lyrics>

Granted, the second song has a stronger rhyme scheme; it's 'a-a-b-b' rather than 'Fuentes doing whatever he wants', and in the strictest sense of the word, it is a stronger poem, if you take those four lines alone, which isn't really fair to "Caraphernelia."

*But.*

Compare it to some Keats:

"And this is why I sojourn here,

Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is withered from the lake,

And no birds sing."<sup>14</sup>

It's pretty obvious that "Caraphernelia" has more similarities than "Fat Lip" does—and it is true, maybe this isn't a good example of each band. But it is a good example of the genre. The first line that pops into my head whenever I think 'emo music', is the first wailing "Sunshine!" of "Caraphernelia", and the first line that pops into my head when I think 'pop-punk' is the first line of the chorus of "Fat Lip": "I'm not gonna waste my time / be another casualty of society." Both songs, even if the bands have more to them than that song, encapsulate the whole of the genre.

While the Romantics, especially the earlier ones like Blake, had a lot to say about society, a lot of them did talk a lot about love, and the fleeting of life (Hello, Keats). And even the ones that did talk about society have an air about them that they're kind of lost—they don't have that solid anarchy in their poems that pop-punk singers scrawl out in their songs. As a whole, the Romantic poets would have loved to have *Sleeping With Sirens* pumping through their headphones while they wrote their poems, and I will literally fight anyone who says differently.

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<sup>14</sup> "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," John Keats, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44475/la-belle-dame-sans-merci-a-ballad>, which I really want to put as all lower-case because that's how the French write their titles after the first word but that's not what we do in English, thanks, Keats.