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‘A Poet Participates in the Eternal’: Shelley Through the Prism of

A Defence of Poetry

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Abstract:

This thesis explores to what extent Shelley's poetry fulfils his own criteria for the ideal poet which he establishes in his essay *A Defence of Poetry*. The three chapters of this thesis provide an examination of three key aspects of poetry, namely artistry, politics, and legacy, and they show that each of these aspects of poetry are interconnected and self-fulfilling within a poet's career. The thesis combines biographical and historical methods with a close reading of some of Shelley's most influential poetry to examine the efficacy of his poetic criteria.



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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my lovely friend Andy Wise, who died while I was writing it, and to the life of my nephew Jude Turk, who was born just at the end of it.



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Introduction

Shelley's 1818 sonnet 'Ozymandias' raises questions around art, politics, and legacy – questions which will be at the heart of this thesis. The poem focuses on the fictional discovery of a monument dedicated to the pharaoh of Ancient Egypt Ramses II. Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy note that as the poem has been 'Widely cited and anthologized, the sonnet is one of the best-known short poems in the English language'.¹ It is ironic that the poem has become such a famous example within Shelley's poetic works, as he uses the symbol of Ozymandias' destroyed statue to interrogate how legacy varies between life and death.

The sonnet form reflects the narrator's archaic view of the statue of Ozymandias – both the form of the poem and the Ozymandias' sculpture are archaic art forms representing a time in history where inherited power afforded one the right to create art. While the sonnet was transformed in the Romantic period, being used as a more innovative form than before, A. D Cousins and Peter Howarth argue that 'It has been held up as poetry's epitome and poetry's enemy; it has been the language of lords'.²³ Shelley's choice in form mimics the discovery of Ozymandias' destroyed statue— through the poem, we journey through the reported opinions of Ozymandias and his statue's creation, before we read Ozymandias' proclamation, guided through this revelation by the sonnet. While the poem details the

¹ Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy, 'Notes' in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 679-880 (p. 725).

² A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, 'Introduction' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-5 (p. 1).

³ Michael O'Neill, 'The Romantic sonnet' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 185-203 (p. 186). O'Neill refers to Charlotte Smith's innovation of the sonnet in the late eighteenth century: 'Smith's revival of the sonnet bequeaths to subsequent writers, both male and female, a sophisticated poetic instrument, one that permits the exploration of what it is to express feeling in a poem'.

[REDACTED]

destruction of his statue, the poem's form attempts to resolve this sense of corruption, with the rhyme scheme searching for a completed couplet of masculine rhymes. The poem states:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert ... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works ye Mighty, and despair!"
No thing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'—⁴⁵

The octet recalls a conversation between the poem's narrator and an unnamed 'traveller from an antique land' (l. 1) who describes the destruction of Ozymandias' monument. Shelley emphasises this scene of destruction, as he portrays the 'vast and trunkless legs' (l. 2) of an abandoned monument in a lifeless desert. His emphasis that the similarly abandoned monument, which has been left to decay in a place which was once vibrant and thriving, but

⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ozymandias' in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, vol 2 (London: Pearson, 2000), pp. 310-11. All subsequent references to Shelley's poems (unless otherwise stated) are to this edition.



is now described in the line ‘Half sunk a shattered visage lies’ (l. 4) is a reminder of the passage of time and the fallibility of success, with the statue symbolising something which was once carefully crafted and worshipped, but which has now been forgotten.

The second half of the octet concerns Ozymandias’ political character, as perceived by the traveller. The narrator and the reader are told by this traveller that the ‘frown, | And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, | Tell that its sculptor well those passions read’ (ll. 4-6), implying that he is a ruler who is both miserable and cruel in his alliterative ‘cold command’ (l. 6), suggesting that his rule was tyrannical. Shelley makes this sense of Ozymandias’ tyranny more concrete in the description of his statue in the sonnet’s sestet. The statue proudly declares:

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works ye Mighty, and despair!” (ll. 10-11)

The statue’s declaration suggests power and confidence, with the assertion that he is ‘King of Kings’ (l. 10), the most powerful of a section of powerful rulers, demonstrates the political control implied by his facial expressions to be true. While a statue suggests reverence to a powerful figure, this reverence is demanded by Ozymandias as a leader, with his wish that his presence should cause others to ‘despair’ (l. 11) suggesting a figure that is tyrannical, and who thrives on the control and subservience of their subjects.

Shelley’s pacing of the lines of the sestet gives a sense of pathos to Ozymandias’ political career, allowing the reader to examine his legacy in the light of his cruelty. The stark contrast between Ozymandias’ past proclamations and the ‘boundless and bare’ (l. 13) is evidence of Ozymandias’ legacy; while the statue may have been intended as a symbol of Ozymandias’ powerful legacy, it is actually the opposite— its ‘shattered’ (l. 4) appearance

shows no reverence for the ruler, but instead portrays an abandoned monument, forgotten by the people and neglected to be subsumed by the landscape. This sense of pathos elucidates Ozymandias' political mistakes— that if he had been as concerned with the needs of his people as he had been with the construction of his statuesque legacy, his legacy may have been more favourable, and his memorial more preserved. Shelley agrees that this destruction is justified, as suggested by Timothy Morton's argument that 'For Shelley, a just society would have persisted, not decayed. Tyranny undermines itself'.⁶ Morton's analysis shows not only that Shelley is critical of Ozymandias in a political light, but that the poem reflects a tension between the memorialisation and the eradication of legacy. Ironically, Shelley's depiction of Ozymandias, both through the narrator's fictional account and Shelley's own poem, serves as a method of remembering him through art, with the poem itself becoming an artistic piece of memorialisation.

David Mikics frames the poem's style as one that is caught between an 'epitaphic tradition' and the reality of destroyed art.⁷ Mikics states:

Here [...] the inert fact of the monument displaces the presence of the dead person it commemorates: the proud claim is made on behalf of art (the tomb and its creator), not the deceased. Though Ozymandias believes he speaks for himself, in Shelley's poem his monument testifies against him.⁸

Mikics' analysis suggests that there is a disjunction within the poem between the artist's intention for their creation and its reception thereafter, and the reality that art is beyond the

⁶ Timothy Morton, 'Nature and culture' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 185-207 (p. 203).

⁷ David Mikics, 'Percy Bysshe Shelley: "Ozymandias"', *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69503/percy-bysshe-shelley-ozymandias>> [Accessed 1 May 2023].

⁸ Ibid.



control of its intended interpretation once it is given out to the world. However, the poem serves as a frame to attempt to revive the leader's presence through art, both within the fictionalised conversation between the speaker and the man he meets, but also with the reader's interaction with Shelley's poem. While there is no doubt that Shelley disapproves of his tyrannical style of power, it is hard to forget that the form of the poem serves as a modern-day sculpture of Ozymandias through the repetition of his story through poetry, reviving the memory and interest of the figure for an audience perhaps unfamiliar with his legacy in the nineteenth century.

This thesis will explore the issues provoked by 'Ozymandias', which gives rise to questions around the importance of creation, leadership, and legacy. I will use Shelley's 1821 essay *A Defence of Poetry* to explore his conception of the purpose of poetry in the terms elucidated within 'Ozymandias'. Specifically, the poem provokes questions around the artistic creations of the sculptor, the political power of Ozymandias (having commissioned a statue as a symbol of his social domination), and the destruction of this monument as a testament to his lost legacy, which are all relevant issues within Shelley's own artistic career.

Shelley wrote *A Defence of Poetry* as a response to the essay *The Four Ages of Poetry* by his friend and fellow author Thomas Love Peacock. In his essay, Peacock theorises that poetry, like man and its technology, has developed over time, and declares that his view of poetry within his own time is characterised by pessimism:

A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward. [...] Poetry was the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society: but for the maturity of mind to

make a serious business of the playthings of its childhood, is as absurd as for a dull-grown man to rub his gums with coral.⁹

While sarcastic in tone, Peacock's essay questions the place of poetry in society, portraying the poet as a 'backward' 'semi-barbarian in a civilised community'. His essay implies that poetry, which was once a useful form of communication, has now been superseded by direct political rhetoric. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat link Peacock's pessimistic views of poetry with his own artistic endeavours, stating that:

Peacock, who after failing as a poet had recently begun work at the East India Company, urged intelligent men to stop wasting their time writing poetry and apply themselves to the new sciences, including economics and political theory, that could improve the world.¹⁰

Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* responds to Peacock's goading essay, detailing the various ways in which poetry is not just an aesthetically beautiful art form, but how it is a form which demands a discussion of complex ideas, and can therefore change society through its discussion of them. Shelley first defines the art of poetry, stating that 'Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be 'the expression of the Imagination''. He develops the concept of the imagination, as an abstract concept which happens internally within us, so that it can be applied to poetry as a universal experience, as seen in the statement:

⁹ Thomas Love Peacock, 'from "The Four Ages of Poetry"', *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69387/from-the-four-ages-of-poetry>> [Accessed 19 May 2024]. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁰ Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), p. 509.



Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, next becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expressions, and language, gesture, and the imitative arts become at once the representation and the medium, the pencil and the picture, the chisel and the statue, the chord and the harmony.

(pp. 652-3)

Shelley describes a continuity of emotions, directly drawn from the ‘Man in society’ as the inspiration for artistic creation, which transfers to the artist, and then again to the reader of poetry. He draws a link between this process and the more traditional conceptions of art, such as ‘the pencil and the picture, the chisel and the statue, the chord and the harmony’. In this image, there is a balance between the creation and the method of creation, with the ‘medium’ changing the interpretation of the artwork purely through its form.

Shelley compares the experience of the poet to the experience of artists as a whole, who draw on their own emotions and convert ‘the Imagination’ into art. It explores the creation of art (which is a purely solitary experience) and interrogates how this art changes when it is introduced into the society in which the poet belongs:

It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound of the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age.

(p. 678)



It is Shelley's view that poetry is a lively form which moves him to 'being startled with the electric life which burns within their words'. He argues that it is innate in poetry that 'They [poets] measure the circumference and sound of the depths of human nature' — that analysing human behaviour is the crux of poetic writing, and that even poetry with a single narrator which is analysing non-human objects, is itself a commentary on human behaviour. The verb 'measure', along with the scientific nature of 'the circumference and sound' affords poetry an element of rationality that it is not often associated with— Shelley is presenting poetry as a medium which consciously reflects the society around the poet (which the poet has studied carefully), and the poet as a figure who is able to adapt their talents to reflect in their work what they see before them.

Shelley says that a poet will do this 'with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit', implying that poetry is a vocation that compels an artist to give their life to an art form, and which consumes the life of the artist, transforming their perception of the world into one of curiosity and creation. As poetry is an 'all-penetrating spirit', Shelley's logic follows that if an artist is precise enough in their craft, and is able to represent the world around them as accurately as possible, the poet's messages will be 'all-penetrating', and their messages will infiltrate the public in its most effective way. However, Shelley's argument assumes that society is one which is open to poetry as a means for encouraging empathy or introspection — it assumes that all of society thinks in the empathetic way that poets can.

In this analogy, the artists 'are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations', as the artist is pushing the boundaries of their creativity through the inspiration that they gain from the society around them. He states that 'it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age', as he conjectures that each artist is moulded by the cultural and societal trends of their own era. Through this argument, we can see that Shelley views poetry

as an art form which has its own legacy, as it continues to be an art form which is ‘the spirit of the age’, which can be shared to others through its publishing.

Shelley continues his argument to link the artistic abilities of the poet with the effect which they have on its reader. He argues that poetic art naturally gives rise to political commentary, stating that:

The whole objection however of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created [...] Poetry acts in another and a diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought.

(p. 658)

It is Shelley’s view that poetry involves an exercise in empathy, both for the poet and the reader; he states that poetry is a force which ‘awakens and enlarges the mind’, introducing the reader to the ‘unapprehended combinations of thought’ which poetic images and contrasting poetic narratives can introduce.¹¹ Here, Shelley elevates poetry above ‘Ethical science’, implying that the ‘diviner manner’ in which poetry surveys and represents society is

¹¹ Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 159. Greiner argues that the modern term of “empathy” is a politically inspired descendent of the nineteenth century term “sympathy”, stating that ‘It was crucial [...] that sympathy not secure the sort of intimacy associated with empathy [...] The distance they [the Victorians] maintained between self and other need not be proof of a collective moral or aesthetic failure’. Greiner links ‘Rousseau’s distinction between a distanced, judging “pity” and an ostensibly superior “compassion” that is free of those qualities’ and the development of the term “empathy” which is ‘something more pleasingly democratic, a method for feeling *with* rather than *for* others. Sympathy belongs to the Victorians, empathy to us’. Although it is true that “sympathy” would be a more historically accurate term to use, it is my argument that “empathy”, encompassing all of the qualities that Greiner describes, is more accurate to Shelley’s poetic and political opinions, as poetry is more directly involved with the ‘intimacy’ of emotions and genuine ‘compassion’ than the ‘judging “pity”’ that Greiner describes the term “sympathy” to connote.



one that utilises both the scrutiny and observations of science, but also the ‘diviner’ nature of art, which is based more on feeling than concrete observation. This sense of empathy lends itself to the idea that ‘poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man’, as the poet uses their creative skills to convey a message which involves empathy, whether that be to the natural world or to humanity itself. His closing remark, that ‘Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World’ suggests the poet’s role to be a benevolent, ‘unacknowledged’ position in which the artist can present their views of the world, but which ultimately does allow the poet, in the position of ‘legislator’ to effect changes. Shelley’s argument implies that, as they are as influential, the poet should be remembered in history in line with the great politicians, as the change that poets inspire has as much significance as political change.

Shelley’s essay also considers the concept of poetic legacy, as he declares that ‘Poetry is the record of the happiest and best moments of the happiest and best minds’, suggesting that the poetic form, being a ‘record’ becomes a testament to an artist’s achievement and career, just as the statue becomes a symbol for Ozymandias’ power in Shelley’s sonnet. He considers the poetic legacies of earlier classical poets, stating:

That he is the wisest, the happiest and the best, inasmuch as he is a poet, is equally incontrovertible: the greatest Poets have been men of the most spotless virtue, of the most consummate prudence, and, if we would look into the interior of their lives, the most fortunate of men

(p. 676)

Shelley argues that poets are examples of the best members of our society, and it follows that these admired people would naturally have a positive legacy after their death. This passage is characterised by superlatives, with Shelley describing poets as ‘the wisest, the happiest and

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the best’ with ‘the most consummate prudence’ and, as a result, becoming ‘the most fortunate of men’. This is an opinion that Shelley will naturally believe as a poet himself; he describes poets in this essay as ‘unacknowledged legislators’ and ‘hierophants’, and their legacy (according to Shelley) has a legacy befitting a public political figure— being viewed as ‘the wisest, the happiest and the best’ of society, who influence through art instead of policy. Shelley refers to specific instances, stating:

Let us for a moment stoop to the arbitration of popular breath [...] Let us assume that Homer was a drunkard, that Virgil was a flatterer [...] It is inconsistent with this division of our subject to cite living poets, but Posterity has done ample justice to the great names now referred to. Their errors have been weighed and found to have been dust in the balance; if their sins ‘were as scarlet, they are now white as snow’: they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and the redeemer Time.

(p. 676)

Shelley’s sense that poets should have an unscrupulous character, and if not, then their misgivings will be forgiven by ‘Posterity’, implying that the opinions of the present society are not the ones which are significant for a poet’s legacy— it is for a future society, who has moved beyond the scandals of the time, to decide. Instead of censoring parts of a poet’s unsavoury characters, we view poetic legacy holistically, with their biographical information allowing us to shape our judgement of their characters, which ultimately influence their work. Shelley argues against the ‘arbitration of popular breath’, stating that ‘the redeemer Time’ (p. 676) will be the judge of legacy, which has an active role in improving a poet’s legacy— the poet’s legacy has been ‘washed in the blood of the mediator’, and has been saved from their scandalous legacy. This metaphorical whitewashing of a poet’s legacy appears to be an unfair



misrepresentation of poetic legacy – Shelley argues that a poet can do anything, as the role allows a power to behave in any manner without consequences in one’s future reputation. Shelley’s conception of poetic legacy is a powerful one, which both endures to continue the legacies of poets, such as Homer and Virgil, after their death, but also that ‘Time’, usually giving us the distance from a poet’s career to analyse their impact objectively, is a force which acts to improve a poet’s career instead, removing the blemishes on their legacy. In this thesis I will be examining Shelley’s poetic career from this distance to determine whether his own work remains in alignment with his poetic ideals from his *Defence*, and to comment on how far Shelley fulfils his notion of the ideal poet.

In this thesis, I will explore the three concepts highlighted in *A Defence of Poetry*, namely poetic artistry, political poetry, and poetic legacy (both of Shelley and of his contemporaries). I will situate my analysis of Shelley’s poetry within the wider scope of Shelley scholarship throughout the past two centuries, focusing my argument on biographical and historical accounts, to show how my analysis (comparing Shelley’s work in conjunction with *A Defence of Poetry*) can provide new insights into his work and legacy. Particularly, I will be exploring the foundational level of poetry as a piece of aesthetic art, and then exploring how this creates convincing and emotionally-provoking artwork which can be used to persuade the reader of political ideas, including political suffrage, and empathy in society. The thesis will conclude by determining how these two factors culminate in a poetic legacy, as Shelley addresses the legacies of his contemporaries, before I examine how far Shelley himself fulfils his own poetic ideals.

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Arthur Bradley states that ‘In many ways, the story of Shelley criticism over the last thirty years is the story of contemporary literary criticism itself’.¹² He summarises the changing perception of Shelley within criticism, stating that:

it seems that New Historicism’s problem with Shelley criticism is rather that it has never been Shelleyan *enough*. The story of Shelley’s criticism from Arnold’s beautiful and ineffectual angel [...] to the disfigured textual fragment of de Man is, in other words, the story of an enduring mythologization, idealization, and de-politicization.¹³

Shelley’s legacy, as Bradley argues, has been subjected to a ‘mythologization’ just as his work has been.¹⁴ Timothy Morton provides an account of contrasting schools of Shelley scholarship, stating that:

After his death, readers struggled over Shelley’s poetic body. The struggle was divided between a tendency to contain his lyricism within an apolitical frame, and an urge to extend his political influence. It is too simplistic to say that these processes never combined.¹⁵

Morton’s argument that ‘it is too simplistic’ to separate Shelley’s art from the political consequences of his art reveals a gap within these types of criticisms, as they fail to treat

¹² Arthur Bradley, ‘Shelley Criticism from Deconstruction to the Present’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Michael O’Neill, Anthony Howe, and Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 673-88 (p. 673).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 682.

¹⁴ Bradley, ‘Shelley Criticism from Deconstruction to the Present’, p. 682.

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, ‘Receptions’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 35-42 (p. 36).

[REDACTED]

poetry as a holistic piece of art.¹⁶ The process of composing a piece of art requires a society to influence the piece, both in inspiring its creation, and through the audience who receives it. Through my analysis of *A Defence of Poetry*, which will be set alongside my selection of Shelley's poems, I will show how the themes of artistry, politics, and legacy are intrinsically linked within Shelley's poetry. Timothy Morton states that 'Romantic poets were acutely aware of their afterlives, and their works reflect this'.¹⁷ Morton argues that Shelley's work is conscious of its own existence, both as a piece of art, but also as a form which will endure. This line of thinking presents two disparate attitudes— that either a preoccupation with legacy shows a conscientiousness in a poet's attitude as they create and follow their own edicts, and oppositely the notion that a preoccupation with legacy is a distraction from the instinctual, spontaneous creation necessary for great poetic works. I will demonstrate throughout this thesis that Shelley's poetic creations intentionally follow the edicts set out in his essay.

Over three chapters, the thesis will explore Shelley's conceptions of art, society, and legacy in conjunction with his essay *A Defence of Poetry* to judge the extent to which his own works fulfil his poetic ideals. My first chapter will consider how Shelley conceives the poet as an artist, considering how he expresses the themes of creation and artistic beauty, and comparing them to his views from the first section of *A Defence of Poetry*. I will explore Shelley's 1820 poems 'To a Skylark', 'The Cloud', and 'Ode to the West Wind', comparing the personified conceits in each of the poem to explore Shelley's conception of life in each of them. I have chosen these lyrics because each one explores the impact of a personified figure which affects the natural world around them, mimicking the act of a creator who observes and changes the world around them.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Morton, 'Receptions', p. 35.



In my second chapter ‘The Poet as a Political Figure’, I will start by connecting the features and principles of art with the social world around it. With evidence from *A Defence of Poetry*, I will explore Shelley’s political poems centring around the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, analysing how Shelley uses the poetic form to shape and deliver his messages uniquely to the audiences of the three poems: ‘England in 1819’, ‘The Mask of Anarchy’, and ‘Song: To the Men of England’. These poems focus on the 1819 Peterloo Massacre from different viewpoints. By using philosophical writings, such as those of Rousseau, Godwin, and Marx, I will examine how Shelley’s political writings fit within the political and philosophical landscapes in which he was writing, exploring how Shelley’s poems may both be viewed as a continuity of post-French Revolution ideas, but also how Shelley’s poems serve as an escalation of revolutionary thinking around the suffrage of poorer people.

I will finally expand on arguments around the connection between poetic artistry and politics to explore how they culminate in poetic legacy. I will use ‘To Wordsworth’, ‘O! there are spirits of the air’, and ‘Adonais’ to examine how Shelley uses his poetry to comment on the legacy of his Romantic peers as figures who were admired for their poetic talents, examining how artistic and social choices within the careers of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats may have impacted their reputations. Each poem deals with poetic legacies in different context, whether the poetic ‘death’ of the figures’ careers is real or metaphorical. In my analysis of the poetic legacies of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats (as represented by Shelley’s characterisations of them), these poems will shed light on Shelley’s conception of his own legacy. Finally, at the end of this chapter and in my conclusion, I will be examining these three factors to assess Shelley’s legacy, and his perception of his legacy, in the light of my analysis.

This thesis will explore Shelley’s work against the historical and biographical contexts which framed both Shelley’s life and the production of his works. Specifically, I will



address competing theories of art to scrutinise Shelley's own conception of the form, I will compare Shelley's notion of politics to those of philosophical thinkers in the long nineteenth-century (such as Tolstoy, Godwin, and Marx). I will combine this method with a close analysis of Shelley's poems to determine how closely his edicts in *A Defence of Poetry* are followed in his own works. I will be following the precedent set by works such as Paul Foot's *Red Shelley* (1980), which uses Shelley's biographical context and historical figures detailing the poverty of the early 1800s to explain how Shelley's radical politics developed against the backdrop of his aristocratic background.

Overall, this thesis will show that these three elements – artistry, politics, and legacy – and demonstrate how they impact the language and imagery, uses, and receptions of his poetic work. I will explore how his opinions about the ideal poet (and their poetical works) correlate to his own poetry, and contrast when the essay comes into conflict with his writing, to determine whether Shelley can ever reach the standard of his conceived ideal poet.

Chapter One: The Poet as an Artist

In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley states that ‘Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be “the expression of the imagination”’. Shelley argues that poetry is a conduit to the ‘expression’ of imagination, and that poetic form is a vital part of expressing one’s imagination in a tangible language that others can read (and therefore experience) alongside the artist. Madeleine Callaghan summarises Shelley’s conception of audience developed in his *Defence*, arguing that for Shelley ‘At the level of moral duty as much as aesthetic pleasure, the poet must perceive life anew, creating poetry [...] that is then perpetuated by their readers’.¹⁸ This viewpoint suggests that Shelley’s view of poetry as an art form is collaborative and involves productive contact between the artist and their audience, and that poetry serves a purpose in delivering the artist’s world view which not only instructs their audience, but which is a cathartic release of emotion for the artist themselves. In this chapter, I will judge to which degree Shelley’s poetry utilises purposeful communication rather than being a purely aesthetic art form.

Stephen C. Behrendt argues that both Shelley’s art and the interaction between this art and his audience is consciously created. He states that ‘Shelley was from the first a performer, determined both to entertain and instruct his audiences’.¹⁹ He describes how ‘Shelley set out to influence, to persuade, to coerce his readers, both by carefully controlling the linguistic, political, and intellectual contexts of his writings and by deliberately manipulating the moral and imaginative attitudes and responses of his audiences’.²⁰

Behrendt’s comments shows not only that the poet is powerful, with the range of poetic tools

¹⁸ Madeleine Callaghan, *The Poet-Hero in the Work of Byron and Shelley* (London: Anthem Press, 2019), p. 126.

¹⁹ Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 1.



such as form, style, and imagery at their disposal to create their desired effect, but also that poetry as a form shares this power too. This argument suggests a dual-purpose for poetry – that on a shallower level it can be appreciated as an artform which inspires beauty and admiration, and on the other, it can both inspire thinking and discussion and also effectively communicate the social beliefs of the poet. This chapter will explore the subtlety and craft of the poet's creation, as modelled by the subjects of Shelley's poetry.

Shelley uses his poetry as a mouthpiece for the viewpoint of the artist, reflecting the ambitions and creations of the artist through non-human conceits, and setting the deeply human activity of creation apart from humanity in an effort to analyse it from an objective distance. My analysis of his works in this Chapter will compare the creations of the figures in the poems 'To a Skylark', 'The Cloud', and 'Ode to the West Wind'. In these poems the figures of the skylark, the cloud, and the wind become emblems for the artist's creative process. I will judge how each figure represents elements of the creative process, to determine what they teach us about Shelley's conception of the artist as a successful creator. I will argue that none of the poems directly fulfil Shelley's outlined criteria for the ideal poet, as outlined in *A Defence of Poetry*, but that this unfulfilled ambition gives his poems their meaning. Each figure represents an aspirational, yet unrealistic image of what the poet can never be.

In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock, Shelley considers the longevity of poetry as a form. He states that:

books are perhaps the only productions of man to coeval with the human race.

Sophocles and Shakespeare can be produced and reproduced for ever. But how

evanescent are paintings [...] There is one refuge from the despondency of this

contemplation. The material part, indeed, of their works must perish. But they survive

in the mind of man, and the remembrances connected with them are transmitted from generation to generation. The poet embodies them in his creations.²¹

Shelley compares both the physical permanence of paintings and their popularity with that of poetry. He portrays paintings as ‘one refuge from the despondency of this contemplation’, highlighting the way in which art can profoundly transform the life of the viewer, that it can be a ‘refuge’ from the negative realities of life. It is Shelley’s view that art is not restricted by time (as humans are), but ‘survive[s] in the mind of man’ and is ‘transmitted from generation to generation’ continuing to be a source of inspiration and creativity for newer readers beyond the artist’s death. Therefore, Shelley conceives of art, and by implication poetry, as a ‘refuge’ from the banality of normal life, and a practice in which both poet and reader improve their enjoyment of the world around them, to change (and have changed) their views of the world through another’s perspective, while also creating an artistic legacy.

Shelley’s description of poetry as one of the ‘productions of man’ suggests that it is a tool which humans have developed to enrich their interaction with the world, as it can be used as a mouthpiece in which the poet creates, changes, and broadcasts their art to their readers. Recently, Bernard O’Donoghue has argued that poetry has an innate ability to connect with its readers, stating that ‘In using words that everyone uses for communication and the expression of emotion, poetry can achieve an explicitness that music in itself or other formal arts, despite their regularity, cannot match’.²² O’Donoghue’s argument separates literature as a superior art form, yet Shelley’s ideals from *A Defence of Poetry* come into conflict with this characterisation of literature as a separate entity from other art forms. He states that ‘The distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error. The distinction

²¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Select Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Richard Garnett (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, 1882), pp. 69-70. All subsequent references are to this edition.

²² Bernard O’Donoghue, *Poetry: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 50-1.



between philosophers and poets has been anticipated. Plato was essentially a poet', arguing for a broader conception of what a poet or a writer is. Consequently, it is Shelley's view that literature is a method of creation which combines multiple different practices, and that it cannot be contained merely to the form in which artistic messages are delivered in, or the intellectual debates which occur in this creation.

For Shelley, the importance of creation is that it allows the poet to use rich images of the natural world to give substance to their visions. His thoughts on creativity are primarily defined in his essay *A Defence of Poetry*, where he connects poetic creativity with the progression of culture in our society, citing poetry as an art form that is uniquely skilled in connecting with its reader. Madeleine Callaghan states that, for Shelley, creativity involves 'Highlighting the poet as forming part of a tradition, the poet is not engaged in anything less than an act of creation in the wake of those who created before him, refreshing that which he inherits'.²³ Callaghan's argument presents Shelley's conceptualised poet as a metaphorical 'torch bearer' for poetry's culturally prominent position. William Keach contrasts this notion that poetry is the perfect art form for Shelley's aims, stating that:

On the one hand, Shelley argues in the *Defence* that language is entirely a product of the mind and is therefore more fully and precisely expressive of thought than any other medium. On the other hand, he implies in certain passages of the *Defence* and says explicitly elsewhere that words, once they are spoken or written, separate themselves from the mind that produced them and are therefore inherently imperfect signs of thought.²⁴

²³ Madeleine Callaghan, *The Poet-Hero in the Work of Byron and Shelley*, p. 126.

²⁴ William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), p. 2.



While Keach's argument may be correct that words (and therefore poems) are 'inherently imperfect', they are the only tools of the poet as an artist, as they are the bedrock of any meaning of any creation.²⁵ In this chapter, I will explore the concept of the 'imperfect' creator through Shelley's non-human poetical characters, while I will address the negative consequences of the poet having their creation become 'separate [...] from the mind that produced them' in my discussion of poetic legacy in Chapter 3.²⁶ By contrast, Ross Wilson argues the inverse of Keach's argument – it is in fact poetry which improves the poet – as he states that '[*A Defence of Poetry*] does not say that the combinations of thought that poetry makes possible are unapprehended but rather that the mind, without poetry, lacks the capacity for them'.²⁷ Wilson's argument proposes a symbiotic connection between the poet and their poetry, suggesting that poetry is not just a tool, but the extension of the poet.

Throughout this section I will highlight ways in which Shelley presents the poet, first through the perfection of the symbol of the bird in 'To a Skylark'; secondly, through the theme of regeneration in 'The Cloud', and finally through the tension between hope and decay in 'Ode to the West Wind'. I will examine how the view of the artist changes between these poems, and I will compare these views to his essay *A Defence of Poetry*. Overall, in this chapter I will argue that Shelley's view of poetic creation changes through his artistic career.

Shelley's poem 'To a Skylark' (1820) was written following his own sighting of the bird at dawn, where he heard the skylark's song. It features the flight of a bird in the morning sky. Shelley uses this motif as a celebration of poetic creation, of which the bird's song is an ideal form. He creates the idealised image of the perfect artist using unearthly imagery and overflowing syntax to emphasise the bird's abilities to create spontaneously and perfectly without being consciously aware of the process – a process which is ideal to the poet, but

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Keach, *Shelley's Style*, p. 2.

²⁷ Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 122.

unrealistic in comparison to the lengthy process of composing and editing a poem. He begins the poem with a salutation to the bird:

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

(ll. 1-5)

The speaker salutes the bird as if it is something remarkable that is to be respected – a ‘blithe Spirit’ (l. 1) rather than a common bird that is frequent in the natural world. The speaker remarks the ordinary as something that is worthy of note despite its commonality, and regards it as a ‘Spirit’ (l. 1), evoking the sense of it having a soul, rather than being a simple creature low down on the food chain. Shelley develops this sense of the bird’s soul, stating ‘Bird thou never wert’ (l. 2), elevating the bird from an animal that should be respected for its qualities, to something that transcends a mortal body. This suggests that the bird, as a symbol of the poet, demonstrates that mankind should develop beyond its physical constraints of mortality (as the skylark has) and transform into something with more permanence, transcending the dullness of the common world for artistic excellence. However, this aim is impossible, as the skylark (like the reader) is also constrained by its physicality and mortality, so can never fully align with the unadulterated physical freedom that the narrator ascribes to it. Here, we have a tension between the bodily and the spiritual, as creativity is stifled by the limitations of life. Because the skylark has a ‘Spirit’ (l. 1) deserving of respect, it is as much of a being as the narrator observing it, and deserves the salutation given by the speaker just as much as another



human would. Shelley reveals that the bird has celestial origins in line three, stating that it is so revered by the speaker that it is ‘from Heaven’ (l. 4), implying that it was a perfect creation. However, Shelley modifies the transcendent state that he affords to the bird, stating that it originates from ‘Heaven, or near it’ (l. 3), implying that the bird is so perfect, that it is as close to a heavenly object that an atheist such as Shelley can conceive. Here Shelley implicitly highlights a tension between the ‘perfect’ creator, and one that is corporeal – the beauty of the skylark’s song is so inspiring to the narrator, that they decorate the skylark with heavenly imagery, as if it either were a creation from God, or as if it were a god itself creating its own perfect song. Before the lines can run away with the perfection that heavenly creation inspires (and therefore that the human poet can never achieve) Shelley modifies this image, framing the skylark’s song as almost perfect, almost heavenly. The adjustment of this image from heavenly to corporeal refocuses the poem, and it affords more power to the skylark’s creation – it does not create because it has been directed by God, it sings because it feels compelled to, and it participates within the morning chorus of its surroundings.

Shelley presents the bird’s act of creation in its song as one that is true, uninhibited by society around it, in the line ‘Pourest thy full heart’ (l. 4), anticipating the last and longest polysyllabic line of the stanza. In line five, Shelley mimics the bird’s act of creation in its song in his construction of the phrase ‘In profuse strains of unpremeditated art’ (l. 5), where the adjective foreshadows the ‘profuse’ (l. 5) nature of the polysyllabic ‘unpremeditated’ (l. 5). The fact that the bird’s song is spontaneous is particularly relevant to Shelley in its consideration of the origins of creation, as the bird creates its song naturally, without the artificial nature of trying to create, suggesting that the conscious act of creation would dilute true poetic expression, making it artificial. The skylark’s song is not impeded by trying to force the creative process, as humans may do – it merely sings because it wants to. While this state appears to be perfect at first glance, as the skylark produces art so beautiful in its

perfection that it appears to have been sent it through a deity, the skylark never achieves true creative satisfaction; the skylark, through its innate perfection, never has the opportunity to learn perseverance or character through its tribulations in perfecting its craft, nor ever edits its work— it is, in effect, doomed to always create perfection in ‘unpremeditated art’ (l. 5), a distinctively unhuman quality.

Consequently, his opening stanza presents a complex and moral creature so perfect in its ability to produce art, that its art is unthought and ‘full’ (l. 4) with natural emotion, which suggests that Shelley presents the skylark as the ideal artist to be emulated by others in its spirit, but not to cast the skylark as a figure of ambition, as its talents are unachievable by humanity. However, this lofty, ‘Heaven[ly]’ (l. 3) bird, at a second glance, appears too unrestrained and perfect for humanity to emulate – we do not exist in the same ‘blithe’ (l. 1) manner that the bird does in its natural freedom, and the reader (confined to human society) can only admire the skylark’s freedom from afar, as the speaker does.

Shelley continues his celebration of the skylark, framing his descriptions of it in hyperbolic superlatives to emphasise its achievements. The bird travels ‘Higher still and higher’ (l. 6), suggesting that the bird returns to the glory of its almost heavenly birth when it creates, rising high above humans in its proximal superiority to become both physically and morally ‘higher’ (l. 6) than us. The creation and the flight of the bird go together in the line ‘And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest’ (l. 10), implying that the skylark’s journey upwards only increases its abilities as it sees more of the world and gains more momentum. The alliteration of the line emphasises the able way that the skylark is ‘soaring’ (l. 10), with the soft sounds evoking a graceful flight, contrasting the bird’s delicate and gentle nature with the powerful ‘soaring’ (l. 10) which it enacts. The permanence of the phrase ‘ever singest’ (l. 10) gives a sense of constancy, which Shelley develops from the present tense ‘singing’ (l. 10), suggesting that once the act of creation has begun, the art and

the artist are consecrated in their art, with art becoming a living legacy of the poet, ‘ever’ (l. 10) continuing after their death. Here we see the skylark fulfilling Shelley’s argument (written to Peacock) that art ‘survive[s] in the mind of man’ (p. 69)— that once the skylark begins ‘singing’ (l. 10), it ‘ever singest’ (l. 10). However, despite the fact that it ‘ever singest’ (l. 10), the reader knows that the skylark, like artists, will have its creativity ended by death — despite being heavenly, the skylark remains as mortal as us. Therefore, the superlative ‘ever singest’ (l. 10) suggests that it will sing forever, and that art is eternal.

Shelley moves the focus of the poem to the elevated sky, where he states:

All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow’d.

(ll. 26-30)

Shelley uses a motif of excess again to emphasise the outpouring of art that has ‘overflow’d’ (l. 30) from the skylark to ‘all the earth and air’ (l. 26). The range of these images, from the grounded ‘earth and air’ (l. 26) to the celestial heights of ‘cloud’ (l. 29), ‘moon’ (l. 30), and ‘Heaven’ (l. 30) suggests an unlimited approach to poetry— that the confidence of the skylark’s ‘loud’ (l. 27) output affords it the power to transcend the limits of the society in which we live (as the skylark is able to physically fly above this society) through the use of its art. Here the skylark’s comfort in nature allows it to expand its creative horizons and to be influenced by the universe. This artistic creation is presented as infectious for the universe, influencing it as ‘The moon rains out her beams’ (l. 30), with Shelley using the earthly action



of ‘rains’ (l. 30) to transform the solar system through the act of rain (a symbol for nourishment which leads to new growth) reflecting a growth of mind for the artist. This growth is even reflected formally, with the last line of the stanza extending beyond its expected length, itself ‘overflow’d’ (l. 30) beyond its formal constrictions. Shelley’s skylark is bound neither by the constrictions of the world nor the poem’s form, suggesting to his reader that the ideal Romantic poet should apply these rules (or lack of them) to their own creativity, disregarding societal norms in order to produce more beautiful and affecting art.

In stanza eight, after describing the bird’s journey around the mountains, Shelley makes an explicit reference to the correlation between the skylark and the figure of the poet, with the simile ‘Like a Poet hidden | In the light of thought,’ (ll. 36-7). Here he contrasts the theoretical freedom of the skylark in its natural habitat with its constriction of the world around it, reflecting the constriction of the world forcing the poet to be ‘hidden’ (l. 36) from its glory. It is a seemingly incongruous metaphor, with the poet being ‘hidden’ (l. 36) within ‘the light of thought’ (l. 37) rather than the expected darkness which would hide it, suggesting that this metaphor of ‘light of thought’ (l. 37) refers to the day ‘light’ of the outer world. This presents a poet that is hidden within plain sight, one that is seen within society’s culture, but purposefully disregarded as unimportant, suggesting that this purposeful disregarding of the poet is much worse than the accidental disregard which a dark, unenlightened society may experience.

The light metaphors in the poem foreshadow a statement made by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*:

A Poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.

Here, Shelley justifies the poet's existence, arguing that a poet should create for themselves before the external world. Shelley presents an inverse image of the skylark, with the poet being represented as 'a nightingale who sits in darkness', unnoticed by its shrouding through insignificance. He presents poetry as being produced by 'an unseen musician' suggesting an audience who consumes without care for the artistic origins of their literature, only preoccupied that their needs of being 'moved and softened' are met. He suggests that readers should not be concerned 'whence or why' their art is produced, just being concerned that it exists to be consumed. As Shelley uses the metaphor of 'light' (l. 37) from the poem, and 'darkness' from his essay, to refer to the engagement (and lack thereof) of the public with poetry as an art form, with light conjuring for the reader connotations of goodness and purity. However, both metaphors use light and darkness to represent a state that hides the poet from popularity, suggesting the public are either purposefully malicious or ignorantly ambivalent, and this is what keeps the poet from receiving recognition for their artistic potential.

Shelley uses the metaphor of light repeatedly in *A Defence of Poetry*. He states that 'the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power rises within'. This metaphor both supports the notion that the poet is hidden by the darkness, just as the poet's power is hidden like the light in a fading piece of coal. However, it represents the poet as a figure of humility – seemingly 'invisible' and 'inconstant', but powerful when they begin to create. Consequently, in this metaphor, the poet chooses to hide itself to create in perfect solitude, undisturbed by the opinions of the world, and then becomes powerful when they share their creations with the world to then positively influence others.



This disjunction between the colour metaphors in ‘To a Skylark’ and *A Defence of Poetry* is further emphasised by their motifs of birds. In the poem, the titular skylark reflects a joyful bird who sings at the beginning of the day, introducing the world to the morning, whereas the bird of the essay merely ‘sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds’. While this phrase does mimic the soft alliteration used within the poem, this metaphor presents a more bleak representation of the poet in this analogy, with the bird not being ignored because it is too early for anyone to hear it, but that the sun has set on the metaphorical ‘day’ in which the poet appears, and the poet is relegated to the ‘darkness’ of intellectual obscurity. This quote demonstrates that this section of his essay is comparatively more pessimistic about the future of poetry than ‘To a Skylark’ is, as it suggests the poet not as being ignored by society, but that the poet is performing to a society which is not even awake to receive its messages. However, the redeeming factor of the image of the nightingale (and why it is important that the motifs of birds are used and repeated in the poem) is that the bird creates to ‘cheer its own solitude’; it is an independent and self-reliant creature in its creations, and thrives on independence, and Shelley intimates that the poet might learn, as the poet creates for themselves primarily.

In the two closing lines of stanza eight, Shelley presents a warning to society about the consequences of this indifference to poetry: ‘Till the world is wrought | To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:’ (ll. 39-40). These lines present the consequences of poetic indifference through an oxymoron, as ‘the world is wrought | To sympathy’ (ll. 39-40) suggests that society will be uncomfortably and unwittingly forced ‘To sympathy’ (l. 40), suggesting that the consequences of ignoring it are severe. This image suggests a contradiction in Shelley’s poetic aims, that he predicts that the only way society will be convinced of the benefits and wisdom of poetry is through it experiencing ‘hopes and fears it

heeded not' (l. 40). This suggests a forceful and callous future that Shelley predicts, and one that is not attempted to be prevented by poetic culture. He states in *A Defence of Poetry* that:

Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time.

(p. 654)

Here Shelley uses a metaphor of a flower to demonstrate how art can spread a poet's ideas, distributing it as if they were 'the germs of the flower', presenting poetry as a form that is both naturally occurring to the discussion of human values, but one that also naturally produces 'the fruit' as a consequence of its effectiveness in communicating the poet's ideas. He presents the method of poetic education as less overt and forceful than that of 'the world legislators', and as seen with the earlier oxymoron 'wrought | To sympathy' (ll. 39-40), suggests poetry as a sort of maternal, mother nature figure of change that germinates 'sympathy' (l. 40) through gentle metaphors and discussion of emotion, not through the iron fist of policy.

Shelley presents the poet as all-powerful, with the omniscience that a poet has characterised as 'he beholds the future in the present' – a prophet that is wise in their predictions, but their warnings are unheeded. Paul Hamilton refers to this need for the poet when 'he beholds the future in the present' (p. 654) as Shelley says, arguing that 'Both poetry and the skylark's song have to re-conceive each other, or generate a dialogue, for the alien

perfection of the bird's music to offer a future for the poet'.²⁸ Hamilton argues that the poem is evidence of a need for change in poetry at the time of the poem's creation, but this creates tension between the reality of the state that poetry is in (according to Shelley) in 1820 as being under-appreciated, and the ambiguity of this imagined 'future' (p. 654) that Shelley describes in *A Defence of Poetry*.²⁹ This suggests that poetry, for Shelley, is caught in a metaphorical limbo between celebration and destruction, as it exists in an ignored state, and one that is possibly more dangerous for the existence of poetry; Poetry, while existing, is still only 'germs' (p. 654) of a form, read and circulated by its readers, but not harnessed to its full power to change the culture that it is situated in.

In the latter stanzas of the poem, Shelley grapples with two inter-connected concerns for the poet as an artist: the poet's representation of deep emotion, and the indifference of society to poetry's messages. A melancholy tone is introduced to the poem while exploring the skylark's sentience, as he explores the depths of the skylark's song in comparison to the fuller range of human emotions: 'Thou lovest: but ne'er knew love's sad satiety' (l. 80). The caesura in this line gives a physical representation to the skylark's separation— while the skylark 'lovest' (l. 80), this emotion is not useful without the counterbalance of experiencing life's painful emotions to compare it to. It is ironic that the 'sad satiety' (l. 80), a pitiful state emphasised by the sounds of its alliteration, is to Shelley an integral part of experiencing the pleasures of life. This can be applied to poetry in a wider scope – Shelley integrates these moments of sadness in the poem, and while the skylark appears to have a joyful existence in expressing its art, it has an 'ignorance of pain' (l. 75), that, while seeming pleasant at first, is still an 'ignorance' (l. 75) of life's experiences nonetheless.

²⁸ Paul Hamilton, 'Literature and philosophy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 166-84 (p. 179).

²⁹ Ibid.



In these latter stanzas, due to the skylark's perfect obliviousness to human life, Shelley presents a schism between the 'more true and deep' (l. 83) experiences of the skylark as opposed to the one that 'we mortals dream' (l. 84). While the bird may have experiences 'more true and deep' (l. 83), it appears that the skylark should not ignore the wrongs that it has 'ignorance' (l. 75) of, and invites the reader to question whether it can be 'true and deep' (l. 83) if this is gained through a lack of knowledge. While the speaker aspires to the unblemished experience that the skylark has, he wrestles with the fact that this can only ever be an aspiration to humanity. The speaker resolves this difficult state in the final line of stanza eighteen, stating: 'Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.' (l. 90). Here, Shelley as an artist grapples with the pain of life, using the form of his poem to conclude that his 'sweetest songs' (l. 90) would not be the same without this pain – that while the skylark's life and art seem perfect, they are ignorant of the pain and corruption which completes art, and its works are deemed to remain beautiful, but shadowed by their ignorance (l. 75). This creates a difficult tension for Shelley, where he grapples with the ideal circumstances around poetic creation, something that the skylark has no knowledge or even concern about. It appears through this argument, Shelley uses the form of the stanza to resolve his thoughts on this issue in creativity, using each line to provide an embellished thought either for or against creative naivety. Therefore, this stanza itself is a recognition of how the poet (as an example of humanity) is in fact more enlightened and capable of appreciating creativity than the skylark, as the audience is able to intellectualise why poetry is created, what it should contain, and even the nature of creation itself, despite the negative feelings that it might produce. While the skylark's life may seem more peaceful to the speaker, it is clear that they (and therefore we) should gain more joy from being able to debate these ideas, than by having that intellectual capability taken away from us in order to live out a more primitive joy. Shelley's message to us near the end of the poem is that we

must aspire beyond the skylark if, taking on board its positive qualities instead of trying to replicate it, if we are to create poetry that is 'true' (l. 83), and that resonates with its audience.

Shelley strains his alternating rhyme scheme in the last line of the poem, in an attempt to resolve the issues between ignorance and knowledge that the poem has revealed:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

(ll. 101-5)

From this perspective, the future of poetry and its reception is left in the balance. He combines the conditional future tense of what 'should' (l. 105) happen with the reality of the present. The oxymoronic 'harmonious madness' (l. 103) that the speaker hopes will be achieved is presented as disillusioned by the following modal verb 'would' (l. 104) in the line proceeding it. Shelley presents the conflict between the lofty aspirations of the poet as an artist, and the worries that the critical reception of their poetry may never fulfil this need for recognition. However, the last clause of the final line does present a definitive sense of hope for the future of art; the speaker states that despite the ambivalence that 'the world should' (l. 105) or shouldn't have, he declares 'I am listening now' (l. 105), with the poem's final lines giving a resounding hope. Despite the fact that there may be nobody else awake to hear the skylark's song (or that there may be nobody intellectually 'awakened' to be the positive influence of poetry), the confident, declarative clause implies that, although the speaker may be the only ally for art, that is enough. Even if art is not appreciated by a mass audience, the

significance is that it has been created, that it exists, and that at least someone will extract pleasure and meaning from it.

Shelley's 'Skylark' is, both superficially and textually, an example of the depth and richness of Romantic lyric poetry. Although on the surface, the speaker merely appreciates the beauty of the skylark and the sublime nature of the world that it inhabits, these images are used by Shelley as a symbolic springboard to debate the value of the artist, and the nature of creation. While it does not appear that Shelley comes to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the poem, the assertion that we could learn 'half the gladness' (l. 101) of the skylark through observing his spontaneous, uncorrupted creation of his birdsong, he demonstrates that the natural world is not just an object for poets to derive inspiration from— it is a world in which various forms of creation are occurring all of the time. He addresses man's perception of natural hierarchies, where he implies that the bird may be seen as just a commonly occurring being, yet in his view the bird 'never wert' (l. 2) — to the artist the bird will never just simply be the unimportant creature that society may view it as, but a symbol of hope for other artists that creation can be (and should be) something that is pure in its spontaneity. It may seem that the skylark's ignored symbolism is a forecast for a societal degradation, in which the masses ignore the beauty of creativity for that which is simple, but the poem's own creation must be evidence that the skylark's influence on creativity is significant.

Simon Haines addresses Shelley's artistry in the poem, stating 'Shelley had used the same technique of piling up similes and metaphors in order to suggest both endless directions for thought and the inadequacy of language to convey thought'.³⁰ While this comment may be true, the mere fact of the poem's 'inadequacy of language to convey thought' is itself reflecting the poem's final comments — that the world is a complex place, and to recreate and grapple with that world in the poetic form is a struggle, both for the simplistic skylark and for

³⁰ Simon Haines, *Shelley's Poetry: The Divided Self* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 198.

the poet.³¹ For Shelley, the duty of poetry is to engage with the complexity of life that the skylark's beautiful song is unable to contemplate, and instead grappling with the world as it already exists, and yet still making it seem more beautiful.

Shelley's 'The Cloud' was written around the same time as 'The Skylark' in mid 1820. It takes a larger, more impersonal figure as its central image. I will demonstrate how Shelley takes the symbol of the cloud— an object in nature which does not technically 'live' and 'create' as the skylark does, but which is in fact a more complex metaphor of an object that is crucial to the life cycle that lays the foundations for human life, and which acts as an alternative metaphor for the poet's creation. The poem is narrated from the perspective of the cloud itself, giving personality and warmth to a force of nature which feels unfamiliar to humanity in comparison to the symbol of the skylark; while humans don't share the same physical make-up of a body, as with a bird, Shelley's first-person narrative gives an agency to the cloud which lends sympathy. In this poem, Shelley presents a natural figure which is nourishing and protecting for the world around it.

Shelley uses the cloud as a symbol for the cycle of life. The protects its smaller surroundings, and in return, the natural world enriches her. He begins:

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and the streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noon-day dreams.

(ll. 1-4)

³¹ Ibid.

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Shelley's cloud takes the brunt of the weather for the surrounding environment, as the verbs 'bring' (l. 1) and 'bear' (l. 3) suggest. The sibilant alliteration of the lines emphasises the extent to which 'the seas and the streams' (l. 2) have been provided by the cloud, whereas the 'leaves' (l. 3) are allowed to have 'noon-day dreams' (l. 4) as a result of the cloud's selfless act. The personified conjunction 'noon-day dreams' (l. 4) conjures a mystical image for the reader, seemingly somewhere between a daydream and a dream itself– with this small instance of personification reminding the reader that the entire poem is itself a conceit of personification. Shelley develops this theme of protection into that of a parental one in the latter lines of the stanza:

From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds every one,
When rocked to rest on their mother's breast,
As she dances about the sun.

(ll. 5-8)

The gentle metaphor of the water being 'rocked to rest on their mother's breast' (l. 7) is so intimately maternal that the perception of the cloud has changed from one that is bound to protect just by the nature of its position in the sky, to one who devotes itself to the nurturing of other, more vulnerable entities. The verb 'rocked' (l. 7) connotes a soothing action which directly contrasts the vivacious life of the flower 'As she dances about the sun' (l. 8). Here Shelley presents two contrasting sides of life, both deep and truthful, but with one representing maternal kindness, and the other presenting the feminine as lively in its carefree nature. Both attributes contrast with the speaker's role in the poem, with the cloud having a

more traditionally masculine role in ‘raising’ the natural world, with its provision of nourishment through the production of rain. Shelley embellishes this thought in the closing lines of stanza one:

I wield the flail of the lashing hail
And whiten the green plains under,
And then again I dissolve it in rain,
And laugh as I pass in thunder.

(ll. 9-12)

The forceful verb in ‘wield the flail’ (l. 9) demonstrates the paternal strength of the cloud in its protection of the natural world. This strength is further emphasised by the internal rhyme of ‘flail’ (l. 9) and ‘hail’ (l. 9), with this line bringing the consistent ABAB rhyme within the stanza’s clauses, reflecting in turn the consistent protection of the speaker. Therefore, this sense of constancy provides a reassuring presence in the poem – just as the clouds are always present underpinning the life cycle, so too is the poem’s structure, stabilising and moving the poem’s message onwards. Significantly, Shelley subverts the notion of ‘lashing hail’ (l. 9) and ‘thunder’ (l. 12) as negative elements of mother nature that are beyond control, as the cloud acts as a figure able to intercede in natural disasters on the behalf of fallible humans. This notion can be applied to Shelley’s conception of the poet as a figure who interprets society, who intercedes between his first-hand observations of the natural world and converts his interpretations into printed poetry that is accessible by a larger, suburban society. Therefore, Shelley’s speaker, standing for the poet, inhabits the technique of the ideal artist – a figure who disregards any notion of self-preservation, and creates in the interest of society, not for their own personal gain.

Later in the poem, after Shelley has developed his presentation of the cloud's protection of nature, he describes the cloud's influence upon the celestial. He states:

I bind the Sun's throne with a burning zone,
And the moon's with a girdle of pearl;
The volcanoes are dim, and the stars reel and swim,
When the whirlwinds my banner unfurl.

(ll. 59-62)

Shelley inverts the scale of the universe in this image, with the larger Sun and Moon being enhanced by the cloud's powers, reflecting its strength by being able to 'bind' (l. 59) such a large star. In comparison to the sun, whose 'throne' (l. 59) is already magnificent, the speaker adorns the moon 'with a girdle of pearl' (l. 60), gifting it the value of a precious stone to accentuate its pale beauty. Significantly, the cloud also has the power to manipulate earthly structures, with its 'dim' (l. 61) nature being able to obscure the threat of destruction of the volcano. These changes inject life into the universe, with the momentum allowing 'the stars [to] reel and swim' (l. 61) as if the sky were water, giving them a liquidity relatable to humans, and allowing them to be broken from the chains of their positions in the sky. The cloud reminds us of its uses, not only nourishing life through its production of rain, but impacting the wider audience.

Shelley closes the poem with a powerful statement, building to a crescendo through the recollection of images and motifs from the poem's beginning:

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
And the nursling of the sky;



I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;
I change, but I cannot die —
For after the rain, when with never a strain,
The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
And the winds and sunbeam, with their convex gleams,
Build up the blue Dome of Air,
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise, and unbuild it again.

(ll. 73-84)

Shelley presents a reversal of the ‘mother nature’ metaphor with his powerful declaration of ‘I am the daughter of Earth and Water’ (l. 73), cementing the cloud’s importance through its natural elements, and claiming a genealogical importance from its elements. Here the reader can imagine an ancestral power given to the cloud from the natural world— not only has it been nourished as a ‘nursling’ (l. 74) of the world, but the cloud has been given immortality from it, shown in the phrase ‘I change, but I cannot die’ (l. 76). Shelley presents this image as one of transformation from young to old— the cloud’s life cycle through evaporation and condensation it is always evolving and changing, adapting to the world’s needs. This thematic tension between life and death continues at the end of the poem, when the speaker compares contrasting life stages to demonstrate their power over the rest of the world, stating ‘Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb’ (l. 83). The internal rhyme of this line greatly emphasises its range: the cloud is at once both youthful and hopeful about its coming life, and wise and experienced like the ghost, enjoying the benefits of both states

without needing to suffer death permanently. Therefore, Shelley gives us the sense that the cloud has the ability to escape the suffering of life, that when it comes to facing mortality, it has the power to ‘arise, and unbuild it again’ (l. 84) at will, and to exist in a permanent state of transformation.

This metaphor can be applied to the intellectual life of the poet, who (like the cloud) is an observer of the world. Here, a comment from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* is pertinent: ‘for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh’³². Poets live beyond the temporary nature of ordinary human life, and the poet transgressed mortality by evolving through ‘change’ (l. 76). Shelley’s immortality lies within his poetic work, as it serves as a tangible reminder of his mark on the world. The speaker says: ‘I silently laugh at my own cenotaph’ (l. 81) because there is no need for mourning, and no need for a physical landmark denoting remembrance—it is the ability to create works which will resonate with society (past and present) which determines a life purposefully lived.

Overall, Shelley uses this poem to emphasise the delicate and caring nature of the cloud, to represent the poet as a figure who in turn nourishes the social and cultural world around them. The cloud can at once be powerful and necessary for the world’s survival, but also kind—introducing a warmth to the world through its actions. The cloud gives us an example of how the poet should act in its creation; rather than being a boastful creator, the cloud is benign and selfless, and only creates for the good of the world. The humble nature of the cloud (and therefore the artist) has a synergy with Shelley’s arguments in *A Defence*, where he states:

³² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Anna Snaith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 85-6.

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls, open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellency of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner

(p. 657)

For Shelley, the ideal creator is one who is not concerned with the material rewards received from their creations, as ‘no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame’. Instead, just as the cloud (who is crucial to sustaining the life cycle) continues to create ‘silently’ (l. 81), the poet should similarly create with humility while experiencing poetry’s ‘divine and unapprehended manner’. The humility of the poet is crucial, therefore, as it allows them ‘to receive wisdom’ – unlike an infallible god, the poet learns through their creation instead of their creations becoming a representation of their power. This section of the *Defence* implies that, like the cloud, the poet’s journey does not end, but it is a cyclical process where the poet is both active in creation, but also active in learning to improve its creation. Consequently, the poet should never feel as though they have achieved the ‘pinnacle’ of their poetic career.

Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’, written in 1819 and published the following year, takes a similar approach in personifying a non-human natural force and making it an emblem for human creativity. In the poem, Shelley presents nature as an autonomous, free place that exists for its own means, and should not be controlled by humanity. Shelley’s ‘West Wind’ serves as a demonstration of nature at its most instructive for humanity– it shows that the natural world, when undisturbed, can achieve a force of great change, just as the poet can. Irving Babbitt connects the poem’s natural and human elements, stating that it

push[es] the reciprocity between man and nature to a point where the landscape is not only a state of the soul but the soul is the state of the landscape; just as in Shelley's Ode, Shelley becomes the West Wind and the West Wind becomes Shelley. The changes in romantic soul are appropriately mirrored in the changes of the seasons.³³

According to Babbitt, Shelley depicts a conflation with the human and the natural. However, this line of thinking would naturally suggest that the poem, as a record of the poet's natural experience and an act of creation (as the fictionalised wind inspires the narrator to create) is itself also an extension of the natural world.

Michael Ferber argues that this poem is an example of Shelley's formal abilities, describing how 'Shelley's ode is neatly, even elegantly, organized into five stanzas of four interwoven tercets and one couplet each'.³⁴ The orderly nature of the poem's form that Ferber mentions is contrasted by the wind's 'wild' nature, as it uses its force to greatly change (literally and figuratively) the world around it.

Timothy Clark makes clear the link between the poem and Shelley's self-reflective concerns about the role of the poet, stating that

Analysis of the drafts of the 'Ode to the West Wind' reveals that the final section of the poem originally grew out of a study of self-destroyed poet [...] The weakness and, indeed, the destruction of the poet by the forces of his poetry.³⁵

³³ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), pp. 291-2.

³⁴ Michael Ferber, *The Cambridge Introduction to British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 85.

³⁵ Timothy Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 175.

Clark's assertion that the poem depicts 'The weakness and [...] the destruction of the poet by the forces of his poetry' directly contrasts the notion that the poem gives of the wind being a powerful force which spreads across nature.³⁶ However, this conflict is explained by Clark's theory (shown through his analysis of Laon and Cynthna) that Shelley's poetry shows 'the problems of the poet's function as the embodiment of a creative-destructive unrest'.³⁷ This notion presents the poet (and their poetry, by extension) as a force which is not only living, but which has the potential to improve or destroy, implying that the position of the poet is one of responsibility, duty, and influence over others. Shelley explores this power in 'Ode to the West Wind', exploring how poetry, like the forceful winds of nature, can seem untameable, yet sublime.

Shelley presents the 'wild west wind' as an active and powerful force in the natural world, and an agent of change. He depicts it as the personified 'breath of Autumn's being' (l. 1), inviting connotations of 'breathing into life' the still setting, giving the natural world the personified movements of life, and reviving it from death. Shelley embellishes this positive image with one that is more morbid in the following two lines, where he states to the wind that:

Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

(ll. 2-3)

This simile immediately revokes the lively sense given to the world by the wind's 'breath' (l. 1), with it instead using imagery of death and paranormal possession to express its

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley*, p. 178.



movement. While the cloud appeared to be a benevolent and caring force, the wind in its ‘wild’ nature appears less maternal and more chaotic. The obscurity of the ‘unseen presence’ (l. 2) suggests that the reader should rethink their initial impressions of the wind as a force for good change, but instead as a force that is beyond human control, ‘unseen’ (l. 2), and ‘wild’ (l. 1). These images suggest that the speaker is reckoning with the turbulence of the autumnal season, as the reality of the leaves being dead rather than being an intact part of a living tree in the summer, is suggestive of the ending of the life cycle. Where the leaves are uplifted, instead the reader is forced to encounter the Autumn leaves as a metaphorical corpse, an emblem of the absence of life, and the physical representation of a ‘ghost’ (l. 3) of something that was once living, once beautiful, but now is dead.

In the second stanza, Shelley characterises winter with the imagery of illness to demonstrate the significant threats that the natural world can pose to humanity. He describes the living of the dead leaves as ‘Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red, | Pestilence-stricken multitudes’ (ll. 4-5). The colours that Shelley uses to describe the natural world are symbolic of danger– these colours are most commonly seen in the poisonous insects and reptiles, suggesting that the world in winter is one that has perverted the ‘safe’ beauty of the summer, into a setting that is dangerous. The repetition of ‘and’ (l. 4) in the running clauses of the sentence emphasises the variety of these colours, with the descriptor of the ‘hectic red’ (l. 4) presenting the chaos of these varied bright colours, which contrast with the muted winter scene. In the second line, the ‘Pestilence-stricken multitudes’ (l. 5) conjures images of illness, with the colours of ‘Yellow, and black, and pale’ (l. 4) bringing connotations of an infectious disease, that has perverted the body’s natural muted colours in favour of the colours of infection of antiquated times. Shelley provides us an image that shows the dangers of nature in a realistic light, but that the natural world is not just a landscape for which poetic ideas can flourish, but it is a real and dangerous environment. Consequently, the poem brings



a dichotomy of poetic metaphors with the typical wintry poetry of the lyric form, which is revitalised by the threat of illness and injury looming over the speaker in such a cold and unwelcoming environment. It suggests a kind of living decay, when the leaves (once living) are now connected with illness — Shelley appears to be presenting Autumn as a season of living death, where the landscape visibly decays before the speaker's eyes, but somehow remains as a living environment nonetheless. However, just as the unwell recover, so too will the earth recover from its decay— the leaves will be absorbed into the ground, providing nutrients for the soil, and will eventually regrow in the coming spring.

After describing how the wind affects other parts of the ecology, the narrator implores that the wind should turn its attention to him. In stanza five, Shelley applies the freedom of the wind to humanity. He instructs the wind to 'Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is' (l. 57). This image foreshadows Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, using the Romantic trope of the mind being 'an Aeolian lyre' (p. 652) when it is creative:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre; which move it, by their motion, to ever-changing melody.

(p. 652)

The mirroring of this image shows a concurrent theme in Shelley's work, from the poem's 1819 publication to his 1821 essay, that shows the speaker begging for the wind to allow them to be a conduit for the enchanting movement of the wind, just as the poet aspires to be a conduit for the power of poetry. Shelley develops this metaphor, stating that 'It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound' (p. 652). Extending this image to the poem, it appears that the speaker



works in conjunction with the wind in an act of creation, just as the poet does with poetry, and it is a joint endeavour in which the poet (the speaker) malleably adapts to their environment, observing and mimicking it, to produce something substantial. Shelley presents a harmony between art and the natural world, as if the poet and nature have a symbiotic relationship, where they collaborate in the creation and production of art.

The theme of movement as a metaphor for enriching, as seen in the essay's notion of poetry being 'driven' (p. 652) over the poet, continues as the speaker of the poem similarly commands the wind to:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth
The trumpet of a prophecy!

(ll. 63-9)

Here, Shelley explicitly connects the image of the wind as an agent of mobility, and the power that poetry has to be spread around society. The speaker is confident in his command of the wind, no longer being in a position of observation of the scene, but demanding agency from the natural world, imploring that the wind 'Drive' (l. 63) his 'words among mankind' (l. 67) in the naturally powerful 'gust' that a human is unable to make. The phrase 'dead thoughts' (l. 63) appears oxymoronic, that the poet is consciously advocating for 'dead' (l.



63), older ideas which are past their time to be spread, but these thoughts are merely mimicking the ‘withered leaves’ (l. 64) that surround the speaker – the poet is not only immersed in the bleak surroundings that they exist, but he uses his surroundings as a basis to ‘quicken a new birth’ (l. 65), to revive death with the ‘dead’ (l. 63) itself, a seemingly mystical action to regenerate the world. This notion is supported by the verb ‘incantation’ (l. 65), where Shelley suggests that poetry acts as magical force to change the bleak setting beyond its metaphorical and physical decay, where it seems that nothing will be possible. The enjambment following the self-referential mention of ‘verse’ (l. 65) explicitly highlights poetry’s role in the redemption of hope— while the world is bleak and dying, poetry will be ‘a new birth’ (l. 64), will create hope where there is none. For Shelley, poetry is a force, like magic, that isn’t tangible, that seems itself dark (as the landscape) and obscured, yet which has the power of transformation.

The poem’s close unites the emotions of hope and anguish, where the final couplets appeal to the wind. Shelley questions:

O Wind,

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

(ll. 69-70)

Through the interrogative mood of the final line, the speaker seems hesitant as he wonders with uncertain modality ‘If’ (l. 70) the seasons will or ‘can’ (l. 70) change successfully, if the long ‘Winter’ (l. 70) (feeling like it can never be revived to life again) will change into the warmer, welcoming ‘Spring’ (l. 70). However, even the introduction of the warmer season has the effect of foreshadowing on the reader – through the speaker’s question, the reader is encouraged to anticipate the ‘Spring’ (l. 70) that is never mentioned in the poem until its end.



Because this hopeful introduction of the coming spring arrives so late in the poem, the reader is not given the opportunity to enjoy the closure of the bleaker months after such dark metaphors throughout the poem— instead we are left to imagine the warmth of the ‘Spring’ (l. 70) in anticipation of it, just as Shelley’s speaker does at the poem’s close.

These closing lines resemble the power of poetry as an agent of mental change: that, while we as the reader do not get to reap the rewards of the warm ‘Spring’ (l. 70) after experiencing the world’s coldness, just the mere allusion to it in the last line can give us a small amount of hope— that the bad experiences in life will pass, that there is a future beyond the difficult present in which we are stuck, and crucially, that poetry is a tool that we can use to project ourselves beyond these difficult times, and into joy again. Shelley’s poem demonstrates poetry’s ability to transform, that not only on a smaller level can words be transformed into wider conceits and images relevant to the reader’s life, but also that pain and decay can be transformed into art which is beautiful and living, read and re-read beyond mortal death.

The three personified figures explored in this chapter exemplify both the power of creation and the power of the creator themselves. Each figure provides a model for the ideal poet, with each being its own perfect creation, who creates without concern of judgement from the rest of society. The skylark’s creation is characterised by its uninhibited nature— the skylark sings as if it were not watched by the narrator, not knowing how admired it is by its spectator. Through its journey across the sky, the skylark gains respect because of its authenticity and naivety as it creates solely for its own amusement. However, at the poem’s close, Shelley demonstrates that while uninhibited poetic creation may be admirable for the poet, the skylark’s ignorance of the world around will ultimately be its downfall. Unlike the skylark, the poet does not create into a vacuum— the poet creates within a society of humans, and produces work intended to be read by humans, and, therefore, literature as a form relies

on its interaction with an audience to fulfil its purpose as a piece of work that is intended to be read.

Just as crucial as the poet is to the creation of a work of art, so too is the audience crucial to its reception— it may be a satisfying exercise for the poet to create ‘In profuse strains of unpremeditated art’ (l. 5) as the skylark does, but this does not guarantee that the poet will be able to fulfil one of the purposes of poetry: to produce a piece of art that can be understood by its audience, and that its audience can engage with. Consequently, the ideal poet must be aware that their art needs to be comprehensible for their intended audience. Paul Hamilton offers a resolution between the tensions of the skylark and the poet, stating that the ‘future for the poet’ is that ‘he would be in dialogue with his proper audience’.³⁸

The figure of the cloud is emblematic of the attitudes and roles of the ideal poet— the symbolic cloud gives an example of creation that is selfless. The cloud creates through the loss of its own mass— it nourishes the ‘thirsting flowers’ (l. 1) with its own water, the maternal personification of the cloud’s water nurturing the flowers in the line ‘rocked to rest on their mother’s breast’ (l. 7) presents a gentle and nurturing form of creation. It follows that we can apply this notion to the poet too— a poet’s creation is akin to the birth of another being. In his *Defence*, Shelley states that ‘Poetry turns all things to loveliness’ (p. 675) just as the cloud turns its environment into a nourished and thriving state, improving it from dehydration just as ‘Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of divinity in men’ (p. 675). The positive impact that the cloud has upon its surrounding environment sits in contrast to Shelley’s depiction of ‘the West Wind’, which is a powerful figure, using its force to upheave the ‘dead’ (l. 63) remnants of autumn and winter to create a setting which is ready for the incoming spring. Shelley uses the motif of the wind’s ability to change its environment for the positive as a comparison for the ideal attitude of the poet. He compares the movement in

³⁸ Paul Hamilton, ‘Literature and philosophy’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, p. 179.



the environment to a creative fluidity that would allow new ideas as inspiration for the poet's artwork—the narrator exclaims that he will 'Drive my dead thoughts over the universe | Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!' (ll. 63-4), and create anew in the face of the cold metaphorical setting that the poet is in.

Despite giving all three of these figures as positive examples from nature to instruct the poet on a natural and powerful creation, there are elements of these characterisations that suggest these images of naïve natural figures cannot be carried over to an art form which relies on an engagement with society. While the skylark creates uninhibited, the cloud nurtures, and the wind powerfully sweeps away its issues, the poet is confined to an environment that depends upon interaction with a human world— both for inspiration for their artwork and in amassing an audience for their writing. Shelley implies that while the skylark creates freely, it is ignorant, and still as ignored as if it were in society: 'A Poet is a nightingale who sits in the darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude' (p. 657). Similarly, the cloud and the wind, while both becoming emblems of the positive characteristics of a creator in its own environment, can never truly represent the poet—the poet neither has the power to drastically change the world around them alone, nor to remove darkness from the world. Instead, the poet must use the symbols of these three figures as a means to improve the attitudes and the ideals of the poet (as set out in *A Defence of Poetry*), adopting the spirit of these natural figures wherever possible, but ultimately remaining aware that the poet is a figure in society which produces artwork for an audience, and which holds some degree of influence over this society. As Paul Hamilton argues of 'To a Skylark':

this poetic instability allows Shelley's reader not only to be persuaded to find the possibility of change lurking in established certainties and opportunities for reform hiding in ostensibly immutable social taboo or institution; the same reader is also

[REDACTED]

confronted with the emotional and psychic disturbance that accepting such change would incur.³⁹

Hamilton's argument for Shelley's 'reform' of mindset, both for the poet and their audience, may show that Shelley's ideals, set out in his essay, to be a utopian vision that may be difficult to achieve.⁴⁰ However, it is the poet's job to make the best of the society around them, to utilise the difficulties of their society and to create within the boundaries of these tensions, just as the 'West Wind' can move 'dead thoughts over the universe | Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!' (ll. 63-4). In Shelley's view, poetry is designed to improve through its creation, as it 'redeems from decay the visitations of divinity in men' (p. 675) and which enhances the world in which it has been created.

³⁹ Paul Hamilton, 'Literature and philosophy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, pp. 169-70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 170.

Chapter Two: The Poet as a Political Figure

Shelley's declaration in *A Defence of Poetry* that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World' declares his conviction that the artistic and political elements of poetry are connected. In this phrase, he inserts the poet, whose role has traditionally been thought of as an artist who writes based on observations of nature or personal experience, into political issues. Shelley's assertion that poets should have an active role in society as 'legislators' suggests that poetry has the capacity to deal with issues that are larger and more immediately relevant to the lives of ordinary people – those not within the artistic circles of society.

This chapter will explore Shelley's conception of poetry as an art form which is inherently political. Hugh Roberts states that 'Few authors have made claims as bold as Shelley's for the direct political efficacy of poetry'.⁴¹ I will highlight the ways in which Shelley uses his artistry (as explored in the previous chapter) to create convincing political arguments for his audience, and explore how poetry is a uniquely successful art form in conveying the emotional struggles of poverty and subordination compared to other art forms. I will show how Shelley addresses issues of class disparity and universal suffrage in his poetical works, and examine how these works compare to his view of the public poet as defined in *A Defence of Poetry*.

Shelley's assertion that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World' (p. 678) is a statement of the poet's dual-role in society—the poet is not merely an artist who creates for their own and others' entertainment, but they are also a significant figure in society whose views are distributed through their works and their lifestyles, and whose sometimes prominent position can be used for the improvement of our society. The Chapter

⁴¹ Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 1.



will show how the artistic achievements of the poet, as seen in the previous chapter, can be a method of persuasively creating and conveying a political argument to a reader, encouraging thoughts about societal reform, or in the case of more affluent readers, an exercise in empathy for societal problems they otherwise may never encounter.

Shelley's work demonstrates his desire to bring political poetry beyond the concerns of parliament and the aristocracy. He brings his poetry beyond the purely natural world, and into events involving the public, such as The Peterloo Massacre of 1819. However, Shelley's mitigation of the poet's role as being 'unacknowledged' suggests that his aim for poetry to be considered as a method of spreading political ideas had not yet been successful, and that while poets may have begun to discuss political issues, these issues were as yet 'unacknowledged' by wider society.

In particular, I will deal with the ways in which Shelley's poems concentrate on class inequality and tyranny, and poverty. The second part of the chapter will then demonstrate how Shelley's most famous political poems ('England in 1819', 'Song: To the Men of England', and 'The Mask of Anarchy') demonstrate how Shelley uses his role and artistry as a poet to address the pressing social issues of his society and to translate them to his readership. This Chapter will show how Shelley's political poetry aspires to connect personally with his readership in the late 1810s, and it will show how his artistic abilities are crucial in portraying emotionally convincing arguments to inspire a discussion and cause, if not a rebellion against tyranny.

Shelley believed that poetry should have influence beyond its purely aesthetic, artistic role as explored in the previous chapter, as he aimed to create poetry which would ultimately inspire political change. He argues in *A Defence of Poetry* that 'The whole objection [...] [to] the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to

improve the moral improvement of man'. Shelley introduces the poetry into the political sphere by linking the 'imagination' of art with the ability to empathise, stating that:

A man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination: and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.

(p. 659)

For Shelley, poetry acts as an exercise in empathy, as the poet allows the reader to project emotions from the speaker to the reader. He puts the concern of 'moral good' (p. 659) as a significant element of importance, as it implies both that the place of poetry is to be involved in 'moral' (p. 659) concerns, but also that the reading of poetry is a necessary act to become an empathetic member of society. This elevates poetry from a purely leisurely or pleasurable activity, as Shelley frames the poetry as an art form that has a crucial role in forming positive relationships between people in society. He implies that the poetry is a place in which people can 'imagine intensely and comprehensively' due to its use of imagery, entertaining other ideas which they may never have encountered, enabling a mental discourse of debated ideas passing from poet to reader.

In his essay *On Love*, Shelley describes how he has 'sought sympathy' within society, and yet found none.⁴² He describes the modern term of empathy within his definition of love, stating that love is 'that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves [...] [when we] seek to awaken in all things that are a community with

⁴² Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'On Love' in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jack Dawson and Cian Duffy (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 618-19 (p. 618). All subsequent references are to this edition.

what we experience within ourselves'. This sense of 'community' and experience lends itself to Shelley's political ideas, as it reinforces the idea that there are things 'beyond ourselves' – that an individual lives in a society surrounded by and reliant on other people who experience life in the same emotional ways that 'we experience within ourselves'. For Shelley, love (and therefore, empathy) is being understood by others.

Steven E. Jones connects Shelley's empathetic political poetry with biographical context from his life, arguing that:

There is a sense in which his personal crises of 1817 inform the intensity of the effort, insofar as he is motivated to turn his energies outward from domestic troubles to the problems facing the nation. Shelley's pamphlets, essays, letters, and reviews from that year (and forward at least to late 1819) represent entangled themes of domestic affections and public reputation, home and inheritance, mourning and legal succession, blasphemy and prosecution, reform and oppression, and the possibility of a popular revolution.⁴³

Jones connects the personal with the poetic, arguing that it is Shelley's personal pain which encourages him to use his poetry to empathise with others as a method of distraction. He cites Shelley's 'domestic troubles' with his first wife Harriet Westbrook, which he defines as the 'anticipation of taking custody of Shelley and Harriet's two children [...] [the Westbrooks] would deprive Shelley of custody, on the grounds of his immorality, radicalism, and atheism'.⁴⁴ However, Jones's comments also show Shelley's public committal to his radical political beliefs, as the personal circumstances of his first marriage, and the damage to

⁴³ Steven E. Jones, 'Politics and Satire' in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Michael O'Neill, Anthony Howe, and Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 148-62 (p. 150).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Shelley's reputation as a result of it, are intrinsically linked to his political beliefs, as his work seemingly disregards the want or desire for positive public approval for the larger aim of representing Shelley's political cause.

Shelley's political views in regard to class and equality were influenced by philosophy at the turn of the nineteenth century. Michael Henry Scrivener describes how 'William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft articulated a visionary radicalism which Percy Shelley, a decade later, was to adopt and revise'.⁴⁵ Scrivener states that:

Shelley was Godwin's most critical student, thoroughly understanding his philosophical anarchism so that he made it his own, eventually revising it to meet the requirements of new political problems and to accommodate his own political insights.⁴⁶

Godwin's *Political Justice* describes the unequal class system in Britain during the Regency era: Godwin states that 'The principle of aristocracy is founded in the extreme inequality of conditions', discussing an aristocracy in which Shelley himself was born into.⁴⁷ The theme of inequality is a difficult issue for Shelley, as it is the force that has bred the 'inequality of conditions' that Godwin refers to in his writing, and which Shelley fervently agreed with, but yet it was a state which enabled Shelley to become affluent and highly educated (and in turn, to use this education to criticise the state).⁴⁸ In this regard, Shelley's political views (expressed in his poetry) come into conflict with the context of his upbringing, as he argues

⁴⁵ Michael Henry Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁴⁷ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. by Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 258.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

vehemently against the social context which allowed him to become highly educated, and therefore to be able to campaign against inequality, through his poetry, so effectively.

This suggests a conflict between political art, and the position of the aristocratic artist, a subject which is later considered by Leo Tolstoy after Shelley's death. In *What is Art?*, Tolstoy connects the benefits of art with the suffering of the poor:

It would be well if artists did the whole job themselves, but no, they all need the help of workers, not only to produce art, but also to maintain their— for the most part luxurious— existence, and they get it in one way or another, in the form of fees from wealthy people, or in government subsidies [...] And this money is collected from the people, whose cow has to be sold for the purpose, and who never benefit from those aesthetic pleasures that art affords.⁴⁹

While it is true that the circumstances that Tolstoy speaks of are different — that poets in the Regency period were not funded by society as a rule, and that the poor were not financially implicated as in his own country, Tolstoy's sentiment still stands: there is an ingrained inequality between the artist and those 'who never benefit' from the cultural landscape of our society, including poetry with language and allusions that not all people have educational access to.⁵⁰ Tolstoy's statement suggests a contradiction in Shelley's identity as a political poet; while in Shelley's essays and poems he writes favourably about the issue of suffrage and equality for the lower classes, Shelley himself was a member of the aristocracy, benefitting from the same money, lifestyle, and education of those he is criticising, yet his

⁴⁹ Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 9.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

political ideals argue for using the privilege of one's circumstances for the benefit of those less fortunate.

In his biography of Shelley, Richard Holmes refers to Shelley's classmate Tom Medwin's account of him as 'naturally calm, but when he heard or read of some flagrant act of injustice, oppression or cruelty, then indeed the sharpest marks of horror or indignation were visible in his countenance', yet this passion alone could not entirely counteract the privileges which Shelley inherited— political action required a form in which his thoughts about social injustice could be organised and condensed within.⁵¹ However, Paul Foot argues that it was the privileged institutions of Shelley's early education which shows the most stark contrast to the poverty that he observed in the wider world, stating that 'The entire educational system at both establishments [his preparatory school and Eton] [...] depended upon unquestionable obedience to and belief in king and country'.⁵² Foot's argument gestures towards the notion that social inequality was ingrained into the fabric of Georgian society, with the education system reflecting one structure that (in part) functioned to reinforce inequality.

Shelley was similarly influenced by the work of Rousseau following his expulsion from Oxford. Edward Duffy refers to 'Shelley's initially rather incomplete awareness either of Rousseau's uniqueness or of his complexity', and argues that

Within a decade, however, Shelley was to arrive at an idea of Rousseau insistent in its particularity. For by that time Shelley would be categorically describing Rousseau as "essentially a poet," claimed for his "Defence of Poetry" and reclaimed from the French Enlightenment.⁵³

⁵¹ Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p.5.

⁵² Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980), p. 48.

⁵³ Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 89.

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Duffy's argument suggests that Shelley's admiration for Rousseau's work grew in line with his rising objections to social inequality in England.

William Keach highlights the contradiction between Shelley's philosophy of the poet as a 'legislator' of society (stated in *A Defence of Poetry*) and his lofty aims for the reception of his poetry, as Keach states that:

Shelley's explicitly imagined readership still leaves us with difficult questions. From very early in his career Shelley saw himself as writing for a 'select' few – a few selected as much by the forces of class privilege as by any distinction of aesthetic refinement or political vision.⁵⁴

Although, the creation of this audience may indicate that Shelley is narrowing his work's reach to the educated elite of which he was educated into, I would argue that Keach's comments frame Shelley's position as one that is cynical in viewing Shelley as an elitist figure. Shelley's style of writing in his political poetry, which unites common political themes with complex artistic imagery, can be viewed as evidence that Shelley does not condescend to his audience, especially those of the lower classes which his political poetry aims to reach—his work unites his readership under its intended meaning (in this instance, political suffrage) despite the reader's background.

An example of Shelley's thinking on class inequality is found in 'To S[idmouth] and C[astlereagh]'. Although the poem makes scathing judgements on the hypocrisy of politicians in upholding inequality, the poem also sheds light on a form of poetic hypocrisy

⁵⁴ William Keach, 'The political poet' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 123-42 (pp. 131-2).

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that Shelley himself struggles with, questioning the ability of aristocratic poets to empathise with the struggles of the working class. Shelley explores whether the class disparity of public figures interferes with their ability to make judgments regarding issues of the impoverished. The poem serves to criticise Sidmouth and Castlereagh, who ‘served from 1812 to 1822 as Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary respectively in the Tory Liverpool administration’.⁵⁵ They state that they were infamous in public life, as ‘Reformers and radicals considered them as both treacherous and reactionary, principal architects of repression at home and abroad’.⁵⁶ At the beginning of the poem, Shelley uses a metaphor about privilege to convey the sense of injustice publicly felt about Sidmouth and Castlereagh:

As from their ancestral oak
Two empty ravens wind their clarion,
Yell by yell, and croak for croak,
When they scent the noonday smoke
Of fresh human carrion: —

(ll. 1-5)

The metaphor for the politicians as ‘two empty ravens’ (l. 2) presents a stark difference to Shelley’s other poetic birds, the skylark and the nightingale, who both portray creation and artistry. Instead of being songbirds, these birds are predators hunting for ‘fresh human carrion’ (l. 5), an image suggesting a lingering threat that, at any sign of weakness, the birds (and therefore Sidmouth and Castlereagh) would prey upon the weak for their own benefit. However, while Shelley criticises the politicians in the extended metaphor of them being

⁵⁵ Notes on ‘To S[idmouth] and C[astlereagh]’ in in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Jack Donovan and others (Harlow: Pearson, 2011), vol 3, p. 348.

⁵⁶ Ibid.



predatory and greedy ‘ravens’ (l. 1). The tree on which they are perched on in this metaphor is an ‘ancestral oak’ (l. 1), an inherited position which stands high above society, where they can view others, and in turn consider themselves as a higher status due to their inherited position. This comparison presents an element of hypocrisy from a poet of Shelley’s background– the ‘ancestral oak’ (l. 1) which he criticises politicians from living within is the exact place in which Shelley himself was born, presenting a situation where we have an upper-class poet criticising his own upper-class establishment for their treatment of the lower-classes without ever even hearing from members of these lower-classes themselves.

Timothy Webb links Shelley’s wealthy background with his political position, stating that ‘Shelley displayed a kind of upper-class self-confidence and belief in his own rightness which allowed him, for example, to intervene in the tangled world of Irish politics’.⁵⁷ This reference to an ‘ancestral oak’ (l. 1) allows us to question the right of a privileged poet to interfere in political proceedings on behalf of a poorer class who have no voice of their own. However, Webb argues that we should view Shelley’s privilege in a different light to that of others, such as Sidmouth and Castlereagh:

Over the years, Shelley’s theory underwent some subtle changes but his strong sense of social responsibility never deserted him. It is worth remembering that Shelley was born into a political family, his father being an M.P.⁵⁸

Webb’s comments present a different light to the role of the aristocratic poet in society– that an aristocratic poet can use their privilege and expansive education to create a platform to educate other members of the upper-class on the poverty of the poor. Consequently, we can

⁵⁷ Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 83.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 82-3.

infer that the aristocratic artist can only be effective when acting in a politically radical role – when they both acknowledge the privileges of their upbringing and use their art to be empathetic and productive in changing society to become a more equal place.

From the basis of Shelley's moral debates about the place of the aristocratic poet in debates about social justice, I will examine 'England in 1819' and 'The Masque of Anarchy' together, since both poems are centred around the Peterloo Massacre of the same year. I will then examine 'Song: To the Men of England', which deals with the ramifications of the social inequalities that the Peterloo Massacre enlightened in its notoriety.

The Peterloo Massacre was a peaceful protest organised by workers in Manchester; Jacqueline Riding states that the event involved 'a crowd of 60,000 gathered in St Peter's Field. They came from all over Lancashire – ordinary working-class men, women and children' and the event was inspired by solidarity, as 'Their mood was happy, their purpose wholly serious: to demand fundamental reform of a corrupt electoral system'.⁵⁹ The demonstration was violently suppressed by the army, and culminated, as Riding says in 'fifteen people, including two women and a child, were dead or dying and 650 injured'.⁶⁰ Shelley, as intimated by the first line of 'The Mask of Anarchy', he metaphorically 'lay asleep in Italy' during the events of the massacre. In 'The Mask of Anarchy', Shelley embellishes his response to the Peterloo Massacre, as seen in 'England in 1819', providing the reader an account of his response to the massacre in the fictionalised 'time' that it happened. This sense of time is so fictionalised because it combines the literal facts of the Peterloo Massacre and its effects with the personified and magically inspired imaginings of the speaker, who allegorises non-living states and events such as 'Murder', as if they were

⁵⁹ Jacqueline Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), p. 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

existing beings to create a more forceful, impactful narrative for the audience to compare their own political situation with.

In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock, Shelley reveals his feelings on the massacre after being informed of it by Peacock:

Many thanks for your attention in sending the papers which contain the terrible and important news of Manchester. These are, as it were, the distant thunders of the terrible storm which is approaching. The tyrants here, as in the French Revolution, have first shed blood. May their execrable lessons not be learnt with equal facility!⁶¹

Shelley's view of the protesters of the massacre is sympathetic, referring to the army (funded by the aristocracy) as 'The tyrants' (p. 212), a recurring label for both groups in 'England in 1819', 'The Mask of Anarchy', and 'Song: To the Men of England'. Alison Morgan states that Shelley's composition of 'The Mask' was directly influenced by the massacre's reports, saying that '*The Masque of Anarchy*, [was] written furiously and frantically in the ten days following his receipt of news from Manchester' in September 1819.⁶² Consequently, the poem, above his other work referencing the Peterloo Massacre, appears to be the most spontaneously produced.

In 'What men gain fairly, that should they possess', Shelley reveals the underlying ideas of his political ideology. He explores the concept of fairness in monetary terms, with the physical items that men 'earn' standing in for larger ideas of inherited wealth. He states:

⁶¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley and Shirley Carter Hughson, *Select Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Shirley Carter Hughson (London: Heinemann, 1909), p. 212. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁶² Alison Morgan, *Ballads and songs of Peterloo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 40.

⁶³ For more poems based on the Peterloo Massacre, see Alison Morgan, *Ballads and songs of Peterloo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018). Morgan compiles multimodal accounts on the event, including those focused around female experiences.

What men gain fairly, that should they possess
And children may inherit idleness
From him who earns it ... this is understood —
Private injustice may be general good.
But he who gains by base and armèd wrong
Or guilty fraud, or base compliances

(ll. 1-6).

Shelley establishes the competing ideals of the 'general good' (l. 4) who work for their incomes and the 'guilty fraud' of those who inherit money earned through the labour of others (l. 6). The ideal society in his view is that people should 'gain fairly' (l. 1) what they deserve through profiting from their work. The inequality at the time of the poem's conception is characterised by societal nepotism— the children of the rich not only 'inherit' (l. 2) money from their parents without working for it, but they 'may inherit idleness' (l. 2) from their parents' passive incomes without contributing any labour – these passive incomes are reliant on the labour of wider society— i.e. 'From him who earns it' (l. 3). This notion is suggestive of a society where every individual would have the same opportunity of equality. This issue is fundamental in understanding Shelley's opinions on the rich: that while their monetary success, gained through the 'private injustice' (l. 4) of inheritance 'may be general good' (l. 4) for the economy in the short term (as it is the rich who are able to change society), it is the means by which they acquire this wealth which creates an inequality in society. He states that the rich are 'those whom force or falsehood has made strong' (l. 7), and therefore, those in society for whom economic abundance has given the confidence and abilities to subjugate others. However, in the same enjambed sentence in which he describes the ingrained power that the rich have held for centuries, Shelley foreshadows the solution to



this inequality with the possibility that they ‘May be despoiled’ (l. 8). He compares the downfall of the wealth to that of ‘a stolen dress’ (l. 8) which would be ‘stripped from a convicted thief’ (l. 9), leaving the perpetrator ‘Left in the nakedness of infamy’ (l. 10). This metaphor suggests that the solution to this issue is to publicly expose the rich as a ‘thief’ (l. 9) which exploits the labour of others.

The poem’s title, given by its editors, appears logical and straightforward; it might appear natural that ‘What men gain fairly, that should they possess’ (l. 1) as shown through the declarative tone. This logical declarative nature, however, exposes the hypocrisy of society– that what seems logical (i.e. hard work being rewarded) is actually prevented by the ‘private injustice’ (l. 4) of the establishment. In modern sociological terms, the contradiction which Shelley highlights is referred to as ‘the myth of meritocracy’, referring to a false belief that the harder that one works, the more they will be materially rewarded for it. In Shelley’s view, the notion of work leading to reward would be fair if every member of society gained what they deserved to earn. The poem, however, describes the unfair nature of society at the time, showing that while ‘children may inherit idleness’ (l. 2), and are morally compensated through their lazy and exploitative characteristics, at least they still ‘inherit’ (l. 2) something– the children of the poor, in comparison, will not inherit anything due to the greed of the rich in taking the profits of their parents.

Shelley develops these theories around class inequality in other poems, applying them to his political context. ‘England in 1819’ begins by highlighting the disparity between the upper classes of society and their ignorance, with that of the people they have neglected in their ruling, contrasting images of illness and starvation to compare the lives of the two groups. He describes

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;

Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn,— mud from a muddy spring;

(ll. 1-3)

Shelley refers to George III in his description of a King who is ‘mad’ (l. 1) and ‘despised’ (l. 1) — a monarch whose mental illnesses and decisions lead to a period of political instability only resolved by the creation of a regency through his son, the later George IV. He refers to George IV in the alliterative phrase ‘dregs of their dull race’ (l. 2), the lowest members of a class who are already ‘despised’ (l. 1) for their misuse of their position. While their ability to be able to ‘flow | Through public scorn’ (ll. 2-3) may seem positive and that they are as malleable as water, they are in fact dirty and debased, ‘mud from a muddy spring’ (l. 3) who exacerbate the filth that they were born into.

The origins of this ‘public scorn’ (l. 3) are revealed by the criticisms of the upper-class evident in the poem ‘What men gain fairly, that should they possess’ — not only do the royals ‘inherit idleness’ (l. 2) through their inheritance of money gained through the exploitation of others (as other aristocratic children do), but they also have the power to wield this privilege over others, as they have the power to create the laws which further subjugate the lower classes. This poem portrays the concept of inheritance in a negative light: for the royals, degeneracy breeds degeneracy, and their bad behaviours percolate within a society which is narrowly focused on maintaining its own wealth. Shelley develops the royal family from an image of dirt – natural, yet provoking disgust– to images of disease:

Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,
But leechlike to their fainting country cling
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow.

These ‘Rulers’ (l. 4) are presented to us as deprived of their senses, yet due to their high prominence in society and extreme privilege, the reader assumes that this ignorance of what is going on around them is wilfully negligent. Shelley presents a degradation in this list, moving from the more distant lack of empathy as they do not ‘see’ (l. 4) to the emotional and intellectual ‘feel’ (l. 4) or ‘know’ (l. 4), showing that the aristocracy are not just unobservant to the plights of others, but incapable of empathy or emotional intelligence for those poorer than themselves.

The ‘leechlike’ (l. 5) metaphor of the following line demonstrates to the reader that the royal family are not only ignorant of the struggles of the society around them, but they are involved in a parasitic relationship in which they ‘cling’ (l. 5) to their ‘fainting country’ (l. 5). Furthermore, we see that in the construction of this line, the royals are the passive agent in this act– they are presented as discreet parasites who ‘cling’ (l. 5) to the country just as the verb ‘cling[s]’ (l. 7) to the end of the line. While they are discovered when they ‘drop’ (l. 6), satiated with their stolen riches just as a leech is ‘blind in blood’ (l. 6), unlike the public they exploit, they still thrive, still land ‘without a blow’ (l. 6) to continue living in indulgence. The poem at its inception presents to us the realities of an unequal society familiar to contemporaneous readers, detailing the privileges of the royals who combine the wealth of aristocracy with the power of monarchical authority, and ultimately using the royal family as the ultimate symbols of gross inequality.

Shelley represents the aristocracy in a more dramatic guise in ‘The Mask of Anarchy’. The poem is reminiscent of the power struggles intimated by Shelley in ‘Ozymandias’; we are presented with the figure of ‘Anarchy’ (l. 30) as a powerful, authoritative figure. The

figure of 'Anarchy' (l. 30) is the fourth of a set of negative personifications to be introduced in the poem. He demonstrates how:

Last came Anarchy: he rode
On a white horse, splashed with blood;
He was pale even to the lips,
Like Death in the Apocalypse.

And he wore a kingly crown,
And in his grasp a sceptre shone;
On his brow this mark I saw—
'I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW.'

(ll. 30-7)

The figure of 'Anarchy' (l. 30), comparable to one of the biblical four horsemen of the apocalypse, is a haunting figure representative of 'Death' (l. 33), with the implied purity of the 'white horse' (l. 31) in its virginal colour being marred by 'blood' (l. 31). Anarchy (l. 30) is a concept more radical than the socially cohesive cause which Shelley advocates, as it would naturally result in the disregarding of law and order for a mob rule; the poem highlights the hypocrisy of the actions of the government, who would naturally advocate for the rule of law, but whose actions have enabled a sense of chaos in poorer areas. The phrase 'pale even to the lips' (l. 32) shows the cyclical nature of the colour white in society – once representative of purity uncorrupted, but then later expressing the dead. 'Anarchy' (l. 30) therefore appears to us as a corpse resurrected, something that seems normal, but is cold and unnatural to the life cycle. This figure fits with Shelley's connection of this figure with a

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‘kingly’ (l. 34) power, demonstrating to us that a monarchical structure, while seeming orderly and natural to our society, is actually an institution in ‘Death’ (l. 33) that is maintained by the upholding of power through ‘blood[y]’ (l. 31) means.

The list that the narrator ‘reads’ on the king’s ‘brow’ (l. 36) shows a demarcation of the king’s attitude to his powers, listed from the most heavenly to the earthly. The line ‘I AM GOD AND KING AND LAW’ (l. 37) presents a narrowing of the scope of monarchical power as the phrase ends— the concept of monarchy relies on a god bestowing power upon a king, who then uses this power to enact his wishes within the creation of laws, allowing a control of a country which is conceived as God-given, and approved by god. Anarchy assumes the roles of ‘GOD’ (l. 37) and ‘LAW’ (l. 37), appearing to be an incongruous and arrogant assumption of roles by a king who has no right to them, and yet the king is in fact entitled to this assertion – historically, the monarch is both god’s appointed representative and also the most important in regards to British and English law. However, this conception of monarchy is outdated by Regency standards– as the country moved to a system which favoured the democracy of parliament compared to the single rule of a king, it appears that the figure of ‘Anarchy’ (l. 30) is an allegory for a monarchy which believes it has more significance than it possesses. This is reminiscent of the inscription of Ozymandias (another example of a narrative character imposing their views onto a ruler), in the declaration:

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works ye Mighty, and despair!”

(ll. 13-14)

Both poems examine the tyrannical figures through the observation of a third party; while the assessment of Ozymandias is giving judgement to a figure of the past, informed by historical

record and rumour, the narrator is describing the king through their own social observations— we trust the narrator implicitly. By this comparison, we can see a consistency of Shelley's view on the figure of the tyrant, as we can see that both kings (as presented in their fictionalised narratives) show a society that is deviating from the divine rule of kings, and which is favouring equality. The figure of anarchy, while declaring his power as a king, is 'Like Death' (l. 33) personified— he declares his power in the present tense of his speech, yet he is an example of a being that has passed, that is no longer living or relevant to the world.

The editors of the Longman edition of this poem highlight the importance of the poem's satirical tone in emphasising the apparent powerlessness of the monarchy. The editors refer to the edits that Leigh Hunt made to the poem, stating that

Hunt's revision of the masque form to accommodate his liberal vision of the times S. [Shelley] carries into the domain of radical satire. In MA [Mask of Anarchy], with bitter irony, he inverts the form's affirmation of the existing order as divinely sanctioned by transforming it into a masquerade of treacherous impostors which celebrates a massacre of the people by those without legitimate title to rule and who enjoy the support of a hypocritical religious establishment.⁶⁴

The irony of using the form of a court poem as a method of ridiculing the grotesque wealth and ignorance of the monarchy is powerful – it both allows the wider public to access a form that was once exclusive to the upper classes, and it exposes the injustices of these classes to the people that they have subjugated. Shelley's usage of this form not only has the effect of

⁶⁴ Notes on 'The Mask of Anarchy' in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Jack Donovan and others (Harlow: Pearson, 2011), vol 3, p. 33.

exposing the monarchy to be a cruel institution whose tyrannical ways are outdated, but also a farcical institution whose opinions and practices seem extravagant.

Shelley continues his motif of a conscious neglect of the people of England by the governing class who was supposed to enact order in the latter half of 'England in 1819', where he develops this image into one of agricultural failure and war. The speaker states that the English people are:

A people starved and stabbed in th' untilled field;
An army, whom liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;

(ll. 7-10)

Jacqueline Riding highlights the link between the Peterloo Massacre discussed by Shelley, and the event which it was named after: 'Four years after defeating the 'tyrant' Bonaparte at Waterloo, the British state had turned its forces against its own people as they peaceably exercised their time-honoured liberties'.⁶⁵ Here, Riding highlights the hypocrisy of the establishment in defending the 'time-honoured liberties' that Riding refers to in France to protect the lives of mainland Europeans, and yet their reluctance to allow the same views of equality in their own country, with their own people.⁶⁶ This illumines a disparity of views within the massacre, which can be applied to Shelley's imagery in this poem. The juxtaposition between 'A people starved and stabbed' (l. 7) being both persecuted by the military and through economic forces producing starvation in an 'untilled field' (l. 7), and

⁶⁵ Jacqueline Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

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‘An army’ (l. 8) is reminiscent of the struggles of the working class during the conflicts of the French Revolution— where a powerful aristocracy thrived while the working classes starved. The army’s powers, which are said to be ‘liberticide and prey’ (l. 8). The OED defines ‘liberticide’ (l. 8) as ‘Destruction or removal of liberty’, and states that the context of this word originated ‘Originally in French contexts, esp. with reference to the rhetoric of the First Republic’.⁶⁷ Therefore, Shelley is using the language of revolution to describe the crimes of the army.

The ‘two-edged sword’ (l. 9) that Shelley talks about, a metaphorical and physical expression of the army’s powers over the working classes, is irresistible for them to ‘wield’ (l. 9), with the ‘Golden and sanguine laws’ (l. 10) of the state encouraging and ‘tempt[ing]’ (l. 10) its people to commit these acts against their fellow men. Shelley presents the army as a device of punishment and dominion for the upper classes, an institution which is intended to protect its country’s citizens and uphold democracy, yet which becomes the enforcement of this inequality instead. Shelley’s comparisons between the frail and suffering public and the rich, capable of funding a violent militia, serves to encourage his reader to empathise with the public’s plight as these binaries show that the establishment’s actions are so obviously cruel, and their actions so disproportionally extreme, that the reader cannot help but side with the poor.

Shelley explores the morality of these acts through a religious and political lens, exploring how these two areas are supposed to influence the moral codes of our society, and yet seem not to in the case of the Peterloo Massacre. He describes:

Religion Christless, Godless — a book sealed;

⁶⁷ ‘Liberticide, n. 1’ in the Oxford English Dictionary [online] <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/liberticide_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#39405627> [Accessed 16 October 2023].

██████████

A senate, Time's worst statute, unrepealed—
Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

(ll. 11-4)

Religion is defined here by what it is lacking; with a 'Christless' (l. 11) and 'Godless' (l. 11) religion, Shelley presents the question whether religion is worth anything to society at all. In the next line he refers to the Roman 'senate' (l. 12), a political structure which is supposed to give order to society, but described here as 'Time's worst statute' (l. 12) — a framework which, like the church, is not representative of the people which it serves, and which exploits the working classes. The 'senate' (l. 12) is described in the political terminology of 'unrepealed' (l. 12), as if it were a law, suggesting that this political framework has not been changed after the violence of Peterloo.

The statutes of the British governments are labelled as 'graves from which a glorious Phantom may | Burst' (ll. 13-4), with the metaphorical good of change coming from the decay of the current political establishment. This suggests that it is only from within the establishment that political change may occur — that it is from within the 'graves' (l. 13) of government 'statute' (l. 12) that social mobility will begin. Shelley leaves this poem, centred on the bleakest of subjects, on a sense of hope: that eventually change will 'illumine our tempestuous day' (l. 14). Shelley doesn't allow the actions of the Georgian political elite to curtail the revolutionary progress of the era— he is confident that, eventually, good will prevail. He is confident that the undefined 'glorious Phantom may | Burst' (ll. 13-4), improving society through the ruins of its current state to enlighten society once more, becoming a nation that rules through democratic law and reason.



The tension between the traditional rule of the upper classes of England and the more democratic thoughts around achieving social equality are also reflected in the poem's form. The editors of the Longman edition of the poem state that it 'continues an English tradition of political sonneteering of which Milton's sonnets on public themes are the founding texts'.⁶⁸ This suggests a paradox in which the political sonnet both utilises an traditional poetic form in ways which advocate for radical change. However, the editors also comment on the ways in which Shelley diverts from this 'English tradition' in the poem, as they state that 'Formally the sonnet adopts neither the Petrarchan nor the Shakespearian stanzaic pattern, the relentless catalogue of national ills driving its syntax forward in search of a verb'.⁶⁹ Here, we can see how Shelley rids his poems of formal conventions when the need arises for him to convey the passions of his cause, implying that this break with convention mirrors Shelley's own breaking from his class into the world of radical politics.

Shelley's poems dealing with class inequality and the tyrannical behaviour of England's leaders also directly address the subjugated classes which his poems discuss. In 'Song: To the Men of England', Shelley addresses this lower class directly, imploring them to take action against the tyrannical behaviour that keeps them in a state of poverty. In the poem, Shelley broadens his political criticism from a local event to the wider society in which he lived. While 'England in 1819' serves to preserve an account of the Peterloo Massacre, and the injustices committed by the powerful, this 'Song' is written directly to the public, encouraging them to question the unequal society in which they live. The poem considers the disparity between rich and poor, in particular the aristocracy, and how this inequality is in fact fulfilled by the benevolent actions of the poor themselves. He questions:

⁶⁸ Notes on 'England in 1819' in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Jack Donovan and others (Harlow: Pearson, 2011), vol 3, p. 189.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

(ll. 1-4)

Shelley calls for his intended audience's attention clearly at the start, and the two interrogative questions that structure the stanza draws this audience in to question their attitudes. He emphasises the physicality of the 'plough[ing]' (l. 1) of the lower classes in comparison to the 'lords who lay ye low' (l. 2), with the alliteration of the phrase emphasising the lowly stature that they have been given. The stanza's second interrogative furthers this line of questioning as Shelley asks why the 'toil' (l.3) and 'care' (l. 3) of the workers (being both hard-working and conscientious) is so blatantly disregarded by the 'tyrants' (l. 4) which rule over them. Shelley establishes this poem clearly as a battle between the classes, highlighting clearly the disparity between those who 'weave' (l. 3) and those who 'wear' (l. 4) and their implied places in this class system. He continues in the next stanza to emphasise that this servitude is lifelong, 'From the cradle to the grave' (l. 6). Consequently, Shelley presents the existence of the workers as one that is characterised by pain and labour, sacrificing their only opportunity of life to fund a class of people who benefit from their servitude.

Shelley furthers this sense of injustice by his descriptions of the upper classes. For Shelley, it is not merely bad that they benefit from the labours of the lower classes, but that these 'lords' (l. 2) are not even grateful or aware of the sacrifices that others have made on their behalf. Shelley characterises the workers in the third stanza as 'Bees of England' (l. 9), a direct contrast to the 'ungrateful drones' (l. 7) of the upper class, a metaphor that both

continues the image of people as ‘Bees’ (l. 9), either working hard or not, but also provides connotations of another meaning, defined by the OED as ‘A person who does little or no useful work, or who lives off others; a lazy person’.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Shelley uses parasitic descriptions such as stating that they ‘would | Drain your sweat — nay, drink your blood’ (ll. 7-8), with the caesura in this stanza showing the degrees that the aristocracy have sunken to, from stealing their metaphorical and physical ‘sweat’ (l. 8), produced by the body from hard work, to then a component found within the workers’ own veins, shows a dramatic and cruel level of exploitation. The reference to ‘blood’ (l. 8) also suggests a more insidious element to this work, implying that the labour undertaken by the workers is so severe that it induces physical ailments as a result, emphasising the accuracy of Shelley’s assertions that the workers really are sacrificing their bodies for the wealthy.

The rhyme scheme of the poem is simple and consistent. Shelley utilises its bluntness at its best in stanza 5. Each sentence in the stanza has two clauses joined by a caesura to physically divide the words containing the workers’ actions and the words containing the verbs relating to the aristocracy. This formal separation serves to emphasise Shelley’s argument, with it mimicking the metaphorical separation of the upper and lower classes in society. He states:

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.

(ll. 17-20)

⁷⁰ ‘Drone, n. 2.a’ in the Oxford English Dictionary [online]
<https://www.oed.com/dictionary/drone_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#6019040> [Accessed 18 October 2023].



Shelley's points range from the benevolent acts of feeding others from agricultural work, which seems to be the point of an agrarian society, to materialistic concerns, but then he closes the stanza on the more troubling imagery of 'arms' (l. 20). The stanza's structure reveals this irony — that the workers, in their amiable hard work, are actually supplying the tools which will ultimately defeat and oppress them into further servitude, as seen in the account of the Peterloo Massacre in 'England in 1819'. This reality seems cruel, emphasised by the formulaic, monosyllabic style that it has been presented to the audience, but these bleak statements serve the poem's purpose of revealing the clandestine exploitation that the ruling classes have attempted to disguise as the norm. This is achieved once again through the structure of the poem— Shelley uses the following stanza to command his audience to address these concerns, and to overcome their inequality:

Sow seed— but let no tyrant reap:

Find wealth — let no imposter heap:

Weave robes— let not the idle wear:

Forge arms— in your defence to bear.

(ll. 21-4)

The layout of the stanza is familiarly empathetic, repeating the caesuras of stanza 5, and through this Shelley encourages his readers to believe that his suggested actions are in turn simplistic and easy to follow. Shelley presents this stanza as an answer to the problems of stanza 5, and foreshadows Karl Marx's theory of 'class-consciousness', as he is encouraging

the workers to challenge their positions.⁷¹ Ashley Crossman defines this concept: ‘According to Marxist theory, class consciousness is an awareness of one’s social and/or economic class relative to others, as well as an understanding of the economic rank of the class to which you belong in the context of the larger society’.⁷² Shelley uses the poem a method of political persuasion, showing how poetry can function not just as an art, but as an instructional manifesto equivalent to those by later political figures such as Marx.⁷³ However, where the form of the poem is more successful than a manifesto is the use of his imagery, which serves as a stark reminder of the condition of society.

Shelley uses the final two stanzas of the poem to consolidate his arguments around inequality and class structure that have characterised the rest of the poem, where he offers the worst case scenario, showing what will happen to the audience of the poem if they do not heed his warnings. He takes these images to an extreme as he conflates the subordinate position of the working classes to slavery:

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells—

In hall ye deck another dwells.

Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see

The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

⁷¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 9.

⁷² Ashley Crossman, ‘Understanding Karl Marx’s Class Consciousness and False Consciousness’, *Thought Co.* (2019) <<https://www.thoughtco.com/class-consciousness-3026135#:~:text=According%20to%20Marxist%20theory%2C%20class,context%20of%20the%20larger%20society.>> [Accessed 19 October 2023].

⁷³ Kenneth Neill Cameron, ‘Shelley and Marx’ in *The Wordsworth Circle*, 10 (1979) pp. 234-239 (p. 234). Cameron states that ‘Eleanor Marx remembered that her father regarded Shelley as “essentially a revolutionary,” who if he had lived “would always have been one of the advanced guard of socialism.” [...] Marx did not, of course, mean that Shelley was a practising revolutionary but that his outlook was in essence revolutionary’. Cameron identifies traits of Shelley’s political thinking that align with Marxist ideals, such as ‘the sense of identification with working people of town and country and not just with bourgeois antifeudal statements that caused Marx to believe that Shelley would have become a socialist, this and Shelley’s understanding of the exploitation of labor’.

Shelley's characterisation of working-class homes as 'cellars, holes, and cells' (l. 25), while seeming to present a derogatory tone from an aristocratic poet, suggests that the society which the workers provide for serves as prison 'cells' (l. 25) which strictly confine them to their allotted section of society, but not allowing them to explore beyond that.

The rhetorical question of the third line strikes a chord with the reader—at this point in the poem, Shelley is challenging his audience's absorption of his message, asking the sardonic question 'Why shake the chains ye wrought?' (l. 27). This image is an interesting concept—that the workers in their difficult manual labour have in fact made the 'chains' (l. 27) which curtail their own freedom. This image is reminiscent of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's assertion that 'Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains'.⁷⁴ Shelley's imagery reflects Rousseau's view that society actively works to enslave its own members through the economic system, yet Rousseau states that this is not just exclusive to the lower classes: 'A person who deems himself the master of others, yet still remains more of a slave than they'.⁷⁵ Viewing the poem through this lens, we can see that the pronoun 'ye' (l. 26) that we think applies to those of a lower social stature than us, actually can be applied to all members of society who are not in the aristocracy and benefitting from the labour of others. The sense of poetry being an act of empathy is prudent here, as Rousseau's argument implies that social class is an issue which affects and 'enslaves' all members of a capitalist society, demonstrating that Shelley's own background is not a hindrance to his political causes, but it serves as a useful insight into a class level which is unseen by much of society. Shelley is therefore able to empathise with society much more than it first seems, and the notion of his

⁷⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract and Other Political Writings*, trans. by Quintin Hoare, ed. by Christopher Bertram (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 10.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

political poetry as an exercise in empathy around class only serves to reinforce a culture of empathy in his readers.

In the final stanza, Shelley uses the earlier imagery of tools used in farming, and therefore for producing sustenance to support life, as the tools of death:

With plough and spade and hoe and loom
Trace your grave and build your tomb
And weave your winding sheet— till fair
England be your Sepulchre.

(ll. 29-32)

The tone of the poem, after the last stanza, has increased in its gravity; while the running list of ‘plough and spade and hoe and loom’ (l. 29) could seem to be a productive statement of English work ethic, these tools are instead used in the preparing of one’s own burial.

Shelley’s message is now clear to his reader— that if they do not follow the instructions set out in stanza 6 (beginning ‘Sow seed— but let no tyrant reap:’ (l. 21), the consequences of continuing in class servitude is deadly, and that not only will the establishment work the poor until they are in the ‘grave’ (l. 30), that they will be metaphorically ‘build’ (l. 30) their own grave themselves. While this seems to be a disheartened end to such an impassioned plea to the working classes, Shelley presents the imagery of the reality of their future as a prediction, aiming to persuade them to begin action because they are already in a grave position as it is.

The poem ends on the enjambed lines ‘till fair | England be your Sepulchre’ (ll. 31-2), characterising England not as a country of opportunity and prosperity, but as a ‘tomb’ (l. 32) for its hardest working citizens. Although, in reality, one could argue that the country will become its own ‘tomb’ (l. 32) for anyone dying there, it appears that Shelley views this as a

[REDACTED]

waste of England's enlightened society— for a country with such progression in art, law, and philosophy, it would be a waste of progression for it merely to be viewed as a grave.

Shelley's discussion of the condition of England's impoverished people serves as a reminder of his own privileged upbringing as the son of a wealthy aristocrat. In a comparison to the biographical context of Shelley's upbringing, it would be natural to determine whether his views around the suffrage of the lower classes are in line with his own personal convictions. In the final paragraphs of this chapter, I will explore how Shelley balanced his wealthy heritage with his egalitarian poetry; I will show how Shelley positions his created political role between these two factors.

Shelley's poem 'An Exhortation' explores the poet's role in comparison to a chameleon, questioning whether the poet can develop their range and influence in their art just as a chameleon can. Shelley's imagery in this poem contrasts his statement that poets are 'unacknowledged legislators' (p. 678), imploring:

Yet dare not stain with wealth or power

A Poet's free and heavenly mind:

(ll. 19-20)

The metaphor 'stain' (l. 19) clearly links 'wealth or power' (l. 19) with corruption, as it is implied that the poet's 'free and heavenly mind' (l. 20) would be tainted by the influence of these earthly influences. While it is positive that the poet has a 'free' (l. 20) outlook, the description of it being 'heavenly' (l. 20) suggests a problem with Shelley's utopian idea of poets having influence upon political issues— that their work (as Shelley himself states in *A Defence*) 'is indeed something divine', and therefore the poet may be preoccupied in issues that are not relevant to the everyday lives of society, and are not urgently effecting the lives

of others. However, it appears to be a contradiction that ‘Poets’ food is love and fame’ (l. 2), stated earlier in the poem, with ‘fame’ (l. 2), and its connotations of self-obsession and notoriety, appearing to be a direct contrast to the purity of the poet’s ‘heavenly mind’ (l. 20). Here Shelley draws a distinction between the ideal poet of his essay and the realistic poet depicted in ‘An Exhortation’ – he argues that if poets ‘could but find the same’ (l. 4) sort of ‘light and air’ (l. 1) that sustains the chameleon, they might be as pure.

The tensions between empathy and poetical power explored in ‘An Exhortation’ are resolved by Shelley’s poem ‘Sonnet: Political Greatness’. In an attempt to create a space in which empathetic political figures can thrive in public office, Shelley outlines his ideals for a public figure in his imagined future. In ‘Sonnet: Political Greatness’, Shelley explores how the political figure should be embodied in public life. He states:

Nor happiness, nor majesty nor fame,
Nor peace nor strength, nor skill in arms or arts
Shepherd those herds whom Tyranny makes tame:
Verse echoes not one beating of their hearts;
History is but the shadow of their shame

(ll. 1-5)

The sonnet begins similarly to Shelley’s other political poems, such as ‘England in 1819’, rousing the reader through listing the difficulty of the poor under a tyrannical leader. The running list of the first two lines emphasises the plight of the poor ‘whom Tyranny makes tame’ (l. 3) through listing the attributes that will not release them from their political predicament. The alliteration of ‘Tyranny’ (l. 3) making people ‘tame’ (l. 3) emphasises a kind of animalistic sense of those who are not involved in either the poetic or political



worlds, as they are ‘herds’ (l. 3) who need ‘Shepherd[ing]’ (l. 3) — not people who have been under-educated and neglected for centuries, and ostracised from a higher social class which might allow them to question their circumstances. However, it is the inclusion of the last factor, ‘arts’ (l. 2) that differentiates the tone of this poem from the other, more positive poems. He states that for the poor people under ‘Tyranny’ (l. 3) poetry is not able to change their circumstances, as ‘Verse echoes not one beating of their hearts’ (l. 4). While their plight is significant, it appears that poetry is an insignificant force in this situation, as just as the rhyme of the poem cannot mimic ‘one beating of their hearts’ (l. 4), so is the contents of the poem unable to reflect accurately the suffering of the people, and then unable to offer a solution to defeat tyranny.

Shelley explores the relationship between the production of art and its consequential dissemination of the truth, which presents poetry as a force which enlightens the realities of the world. He argues:

Art veils her glass, or from the pageant starts
As to oblivion their blind millions fleet
Staining that Heaven with obscene imagery
Of their own likeness.

(ll. 6-9)

Instead of clarifying circumstances through artistic interpretation, ‘Art veils her glass’ (l. 6), obscuring reality with its decadence. Not only does art counteract this political cause, but the past, according to Shelley, will not help either— ‘History is but the shadow of their shame’ (l. 5). The image of ‘the shadow’ (l. 5), while also reflecting this sense of obscurity which is difficult to make clear, is suggestive of something that is uncanny, as it is a reflection of



something living, while being a changed and distorted version of that image. This metaphor shows that while the class struggles of the 1810s do have a historical precedence in earlier conflicts of the world, it is much easier to make comparisons to fallen monarchies than to provide solutions for the dismantling of a current one— history, while similar in theoretical comparison, is not necessarily useful for modern solutions. These images of obscurity and confusion, in combination with Shelley’s earlier assertions of the obsolete nature of art in this situation, provoke questions around the efficacy of the political poet. If the poet does not have power to either create art, or to draw historical comparison to make their points about the political climate, and their art is not effective in creating change, it begs the question whether the poet has a place within debates about significant political issues.

This sentiment is reflected in the image of the next line ‘Staining that Heaven with obscene imagery | Of their own likeness’ (l. 8) as these attempts to portray the political situation have only resulted in ‘Staining’ (l. 8) the purity of ‘Heaven’ (l. 8). Therefore, this poem raises questions around the poet’s place in political proceedings, and questions whether the poetic form (or art more broadly) can ever be an effective medium of debating political issues. This imagery of ‘Staining’ (l. 8) an art form with representations of a political brutality suggests that this ‘Heaven[ly]’ (l. 8) art form is too pure to be used for a political system which neither respects or understands it, but it is suggestive that what the political poet needs to be successful is the creation of a new method of governing, built upon empathy and understanding, which will allow poetry to be successful in spreading a political message. The issue, it appears, is with the political world, and not with poetry or the people that it benefits.

Overall, Shelley’s aim to use the poetry for political and social reform is a noble step, and his example that poetry can be used as a form to help emancipate those suffering under capitalism marks him as different from many of his contemporary poets. He uses his poetry



to directly address this audience, to clearly lay out the injustices of the ruling classes, and to encourage these people to rebel against it, using empathy to convince them of his committal to this cause. While it can be debated how successful Shelley was in achieving social change through his poetry, or whether a poet born into aristocratic wealth and privilege had the right to speak on behalf of those who were considered socially inferior to him, his political poems are sensitive and empathetic to issues that he himself had never faced, and encouraging to those who were facing those issues. While Shelley may have died before he was able to see a substantial political change for the suffrage of the working people (and, therefore, may have died before we could make substantial links between his poetry and this change happening directly), Shelley's participation in the political world, through his art, has contributed to the development of a more empathetic and fair society.

While Shelley's political poetry, as a whole, presents a cohesive message which advocates for empathy, his choice of form for each poem allows for a nuanced appeal to each specific audience. Where 'The Mask of Anarchy' dramatizes the extremes of inequality and bloodshed for an exaggerated effect, 'England in 1819' attempts to convey the mood and facts of a single event; where 'What men gain fairly, that should they possess' Shelley uses the short form to point out the inequality of English society, whereas the lengthy, informal 'Song: To the Men of England', with its direct address, details in depth the injustices facing the lower classes directly to them, and uses a refrain to address these issues with encouragement and solutions for them.

Chapter Three: Poetic Legacy

In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley declares that poetry has a lineage ranging from earlier classical civilisations to his own society, and beyond. The essay proclaims that ‘Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving: it is ever still the light of life; the source of whatever of beautiful or generous or true can have place in an evil time’. According to this statement, the reason for poetry’s success is that it both ‘communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving’ (p. 664) through its artistic expression, and that it also uses its status to deal with the conflicts of ‘an evil time’ (p. 664), whether that be artistic, societal, or moral. Shelley’s notion that poetry is a form which permeates culture, as it ‘ever communicates’ (p. 664), suggests that poetry is a symbol of continuity throughout history, continually conveying artistic and political messages through its medium. He equivalates poetry to a ‘chain’ (p. 664) which binds history together, stating:

corruption must utterly have destroyed the fabric of human society before Poetry can ever cease. The sacred links of that chain have never been entirely disjoined, which descending through the minds of many men is attached to those great minds whence as from a magnet the invisible effluence is sent forth which at once connects, animates and sustains the life of all.

(p. 664)

The metaphor of poetry as having ‘sacred links’ (p. 664), presents poetry as if it were a religious text which binds a culture together through generations. Shelley presents poetry as having a ‘magnetic’ force binding different societies and cultures throughout history, suggesting that poetry both unites people throughout time, but also ‘connects’ (p. 664) and



attracts people not ordinarily disposed to poetic artistry. This, for Shelley, is the legacy of poetry itself— it both ‘connects’ (p. 664) people in the present moment, but also connects us with the past lives and thoughts of poets throughout history, in a way that seems more direct and intimate than any other form. The metaphor, extended from the metallic ‘sacred links of that chain’ (p. 664) to ‘a magnet’ (p. 664) describes poetry’s messages as being an ‘invisible effluence [which] is sent forth which at once connects, animates and sustains the life of all’ (p. 664). In Shelley’s view, poetry is a force that ‘sustains the life of all’ (p. 664), just as Shelley’s ‘Cloud’ enriches the world around it without any need for recognition. His statement that ‘corruption must utterly have destroyed the fabric of human society’ (p. 664) in its hyperbolic tone demonstrates the strength of poetry’s legacy, and proves a testament to its ability to appeal to any society and any culture in time despite ‘corruption’ (p. 664) being ever present. For Shelley, poetry’s legacy is all of society.

In this chapter, I will explore Shelley’s conception of poetic legacy, examining how he received and responded to the artistic work of other poets, and judged them in line with the ideals he set out in *A Defence of Poetry*, before comparing this measurement of achievement with that of his own work. Particularly, I will address Shelley’s attitude to his Romantic contemporaries, highlighting his awareness of the role of his poems in contributing to their reputations and legacies whether they were living or dead. I will explore his contrasting attitudes to the legacies of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, which (in Shelley’s view) depend upon maintaining the successes of their earlier careers, while continuing to innovate and evolve as a poet. Secondly, I will explore Shelley’s view of the legacy of John Keats, whose career was ended by his early death, and whose legacy remained untarnished (in Shelley’s opinion) by becoming increasingly conservative in their works, as Coleridge and Wordsworth had become in the later years of their careers.



Examining Shelley's analysis of the legacies of other poets will enable an interpretation both of his own artistic legacy, and the legacy of the ideal poet as outlined in *A Defence of Poetry*. Finally, I will explore how these ideas around legacy can shape our thinking about Shelley's own work in light of this analysis. Robert Browning, who became one of the first poets interested in enshrining Shelley's legacy, stated in his 'Essay on Shelley' that while 'The man passes, the work remains'.⁷⁶ For Browning, the legacy of Shelley is of 'one whose endeavour has been to reproduce things external [...] with an immediate reference in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men', with Browning citing both Shelley's artistic skill and his ability to transform these skills into a form that is accessible and useful in improving society at large.⁷⁷ In this Chapter, I will examine Shelley's legacy in the light of his interaction with the world (and specifically in light of his political poetry explored in the previous chapter) I will ask whether a poet who is engaged with political discourse engaged in challenging the establishment's traditions can ever be celebrated by the continuation of this establishment in the future.

Andrew Bennett writes on the preoccupation with legacy in the works and personal writing of Romantic poets. He presents 'four necessary conditions' for 'Romantic posterity', stating that it involves 'the text-based survival of the self that writes', arguing that 'contemporary neglect is the necessary but not sufficient condition for posthumous survival', that 'living on, survival in posterity, amounts to an adequate compensation for, or redemptive supplement of, life itself', and that 'posterity is constitutive, in the sense that it not only redeems or functions as a substitute for the poet's life but is finally the condition of the possibility of the identity of the poet'.⁷⁸ At its essence, Bennett's argument is that poetry is a

⁷⁶ Robert Browning, *An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by W. Tyas Harding (London: Reeves and Turner, 1888), p. 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁷⁸ Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 17.



conduit for survival beyond one's life, and the lack of notoriety which a poet gains within their life is supplemented by their posthumous fame. It implies that the poet should consider that their poetic legacy is more important than either their living reputation or than their own lives. Consequently, this argument suggests that legacy is the most important factor in a poet's career, above publication sales, the opinion of contemporaries, or the opinion of the poet themselves. My argument in this chapter will aim to explain how complex the notion of legacy is, using Shelley's poetic career, his opinions of his poetic contemporaries, and the nature of his own legacy to demonstrate this.

In 'O! there are spirits of the air', Shelley explores the writing of Coleridge in comparison to his contemporaries; the poem (which is often referred to by the title of 'To Coleridge') was written during Coleridge's lifetime, but never directly addresses the poet by name. Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy describe that Mary Shelley:

noted in 1839 that the poem 'was addressed in idea to Coleridge, whom [PBS] never knew; and at whose character he could only guess imperfectly, through his writings, and accounts he had heard from some who knew him well. He regarded his change of opinions as rather an act of will than conviction, and believed that in his inner heart he would be haunted by what Shelley considered the better and holier aspirations of his youth' [...] [The poem's subject] had adopted conservative views while remaining inwardly attached to his earlier progressive ones.⁷⁹

This account from Mary Shelley demonstrates the precarity of a legacy— that a legacy (even from a peer) can be created through hearsay and 'accounts' of his personality.⁸⁰ The poem

⁷⁹ Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy, 'Notes' in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 679-880 (p. 703).

⁸⁰ Ibid.



was published posthumously by Mary Shelley, revealing Shelley's previously private thoughts about Coleridge's work, suggesting that Shelley had been hesitant to publicly criticise a contemporary so publicly (as Keats would later experience). Her account implies that Shelley is concerned with Coleridge's reputation, and that the change in his poetic styles and themes was a corruption of 'the better and the holier aspirations of his youth'.⁸¹ This viewpoint presents a conflict between the artist's creative instincts, which are governed by their own life experiences, and which may cause an artist to change their mode throughout their career (e.g. the 'periods' of a painter's career), and the views of the public who may have grown attached to the style for which the artist became popular, and which drew their audience in. This question is significant for the consideration of an artist's authenticity, as it draws a distinction between an artist's innate talent and the influence of their interaction with the world around them, which may mould their art beyond their first instincts. Sally West describes how 'Shelley traces the changes in Coleridge's relationship with the outside world from one of reciprocity to withdrawal from all 'outward forms' and a self-destructive focus upon his own mind'.⁸² Shelley, therefore, uses the poem to convince Coleridge that his poetic reputation has degraded.

In the first two stanzas of the poem, Shelley celebrates Coleridge's poetic talents, using the mystical motifs and natural settings commonly found in his poems as a homage, demonstrating their persuasiveness. The poem begins:

O! there are spirits of the air,
And genii of the evening breeze,

⁸¹ Donovan and Duffy, 'Notes' in *Selected Poems and Prose*, p. 703.

⁸² Sally West, *Coleridge and Shelley: Textual Engagement* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 44.



And gentle ghosts, with eyes as fair
As star-beams among twilight trees:—
Such lovely ministers to meet
Oft hast thou turned from men thy lonely feet.

With mountain winds, and babbling springs,
And moonlight seas, that are the voice
Of these inexplicable things
Thou didst hold commune, and rejoice
When they did answer thee; but they
Cast, like a worthless boon, thy love away.

(ll. 1-12)

Shelley presents Coleridge as a poet who can ‘commune’ (l. 10) and ‘rejoice’ (l. 10) with nature in a way that is mystical. Nature is given a lively quality as it is imbued with ‘spirits of the air’ (l. 1), ‘genii of the evening breeze’ (l. 2), and ‘gentle ghosts’ (l. 3) — images that are both integral parts of the natural scene but which embellish it to a sublime state between the human and the undead. The image is comforting, as it is ‘gentle’ (l. 3), with ‘spirits’ (l. 1) combining with nature. The sixth line introduces a human element explicitly, comparing the ‘lovely’ (l. 5) spirits that the poet socialises with instead of the humans that he has ‘turned from’ (l. 5).

Shelley uses the personification of Coleridge’s ‘lonely feet’ (l. 6) to symbolise the solitary journey that the poet is on, as he finds his company within the living elements of the natural world instead of with the living itself. This first stanza introduces a melancholy tone, as it compares Coleridge’s joy found within his natural community which inspires him to



write with the self-imposed isolation that he has put himself into. The second stanza continues the juxtaposition between community and isolation, with the onomatopoeic ‘babbling’ (l. 7) of the features of the natural world. Coleridge has built his own community within nature by using landmarks which ‘are the voice | Of these inexplicable things’ (ll. 8-9). While the secrets of the world which the mountains and bodies of water seem to ‘voice’ (l. 8) are still as unknowable as they are to man, Coleridge gains more from this metaphorical conversation than he would with a real one, as he ‘commune[d]’ (l. 10) and ‘rejoice[d]’ (l. 10) with their interactions. However, the turn at the end of the stanza reveals that these metaphorical conversations with nature proved to be as disappointing to Coleridge as a real one, as, given the personification of nature as an agent within a conversation, the natural world in this metaphor has the power to disappoint just as the human world might. In Shelley’s portrayal of Coleridge, we see that he casts himself as a ‘worthless boon’ (l. 12) at the end of the stanza, rejected by all forms of living things, and still as clueless as when he began to interact with the natural world.

The following two stanzas interrogate Coleridge on his focus on society rather than the natural world which inspired his works:

And thou hast sought in starry eyes
Beams that were never meant for thine,
Another’s wealth:— tame sacrifice
To a fond faith! still dost thou pine?
Still dost thou hope that greeting hands,
Voice, looks, or lips, may answer thy demands?

Ah! Wherefore didst thou build thine hope

On the false earth's inconsistency?
Did thine own mind afford no scope
Of love, or moving thoughts to thee?
That natural scenes or human smiles
Could steal the power to wind thee in their wiles?

(ll. 13-24)

While Shelley portrays nature as Coleridge's solace in the first stanza, this world has now been corrupted, it is a 'false earth' (l. 14) built upon the 'inconsistency' (l. 14) of humanity. Shelley questions Coleridge's commitment to the cause of poetry, asking if his 'own mind afford[ed] no scope' (l. 15) to create, or to 'love' (l. 16) — he had to achieve this through the influence of 'human smiles' instead. Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy attribute the external issues that the poem discusses to 'the complex, and hazardous, character of imaginative inspiration [...] [e.g.] Coleridge's infatuation with Wordsworth's sister-in-law Sara Hutchinson'.⁸³ This is an implication that, for Shelley, anything outside of the creative process is a distraction from creation, corrupting the artist, and therefore destroying their reputation. Shelley develops this notion further in the next stanza, stating:

Yes, all the faithless smiles are fled
Whose falsehood left thee broken-hearted;
The glory of the moon is dead;
Night's ghosts and dreams have now departed;
Thine own soul is still true to thee,
But changed to a foul fiend through misery.

⁸³ Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy, 'Notes' in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 679-880 (p. 704).

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This fiend, whose ghastly presence ever
Beside thee like thy shadow hangs,
Dream not to chase;— the mad endeavour
Would scourge thee to severer pangs.
Be as thou art. Thy settled fate,
Dark as it is, all change would aggravate.

(ll. 25-36)

Coleridge is in no better position for having depended on the society of others, as these interactions were ‘faithless’ (l. 25) with ‘falsehood[s]’ (l. 26), and not consistent like the natural world is to Coleridge. His life (and poetic career) can now only be represented by the motif of death— that, while the ‘Night’s ghosts and dreams have now departed’ (l. 28). While the poem still maintains the mythical tone that earlier celebrated Coleridge’s unique creative style, it is now emblematic of something which lingers in its corruption, as if it were a demon ‘whose ghastly presence ever | [was] Beside thee’ (ll. 31-2).

Shelley encourages Coleridge to remain aligned with his own principles, as he alludes to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: ‘to thine own self be true’ reflecting the same urging to uphold one’s integrity as Shelley’s ‘Thine own soul is still true to thee’ (l. 29).⁸⁴ Shelley implores him to ‘Be as thou art’ (l. 35), as it is this principle which first inspired his poetic works, which first led to his works becoming popular and respected in his early career. While the poem’s ending may seem to take a pessimistic tone, instructing Coleridge to halt the damage of his career before he can damage it further, it is clear that Shelley criticises Coleridge’s work because of his reverence for his past great works. Although ‘The glory of

⁸⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Stanley Wells and T. J. B. Spencer, intro. by Alan Sinfield (London: Penguin Books, 2015) I, p. 25.

the moon is dead' (l. 27), it was once glorious to Shelley, and therefore may be again, if he continues to follow his instincts.

In comparison to his encouraging representation of Coleridge's legacy, Shelley presents Wordsworth as an example of a poet whose reputation has changed for the worse. 'To Wordsworth', published in 1816 like 'O! there are spirits of the air', was composed and published within the lifetimes of both Shelley and Wordsworth—presenting a more forceful, public challenge to another poet's art and morals. This serves as a contrast to the privately crafted opinions that Shelley holds about Coleridge in his drafts. While 'O! there are spirits of the air' shows Coleridge to have changed as an artist in ways that Shelley finds inauthentic, the poem's tone is wholly of encouragement to his natural artistic instincts. By contrast, Shelley examines the disparity between Wordsworth's earlier political beliefs and his current ones, apparently judging this change as more unforgivable than Coleridge's purely artistic ones. Unlike his encouragement of Coleridge, 'To Wordsworth' is a scathing criticism of Wordsworth's new political position— one which appears to be more politically temperate, and seemingly conservative. Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy give context to the poem's production, stating that it:

may be regarded as PBS's reaction to Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (August 1814), in which the older poet dramatizes his disappointment with the outcome of the French Revolution while endorsing the post-war political and religious status quo in Britain [...] This sonnet laments Wordsworth's apostasy, ironically applying a theme that Wordsworth had made his own.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy, 'Notes' in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 679-880 (pp. 705-6).

Donovan and Duffy's comments highlight a theme which is central to the notion of reflection in these two poems— just as 'the older poet dramatizes his disappointment' for Wordsworth's poem, so too does Shelley, as the younger poet, interrogate the works of his older counterpart at a similarly young and revolutionary age as Wordsworth was during his writing.⁸⁶ While a legacy is wholly decided by the readership, Donovan and Duffy's comment illuminates a more subjective side to legacy, that it may be the case that experience of 'the older poet' is in conflict with the radicalism of the 'younger poet', a poet's judgement of their legacy may be clouded by the radical ambitions of youth rather than an impartial judgement of how their poetic career stands in the moment.⁸⁷

The first section of 'To Wordsworth' considers the popularity and depth of Wordsworth's earlier works, considering their affect upon Shelley as a reader. The poem begins:

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know
That things depart which never may return:
Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.
These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.

(ll. 1-6)

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 705.

⁸⁷ Donovan and Duffy, 'Notes' in *Selected Poems and Prose*, p. 705.

While Shelley addresses Wordsworth reverentially with the title ‘Poet of Nature’ (l. 1), which he is famous for being, he uses the theme of loss which recurs in Wordsworth’s poetry to criticise his reputation. He highlights the irony that Wordsworth’s conservatism shows a similar loss of ‘Childhood and youth, friendship and love’s first glow’ (l. 3) which are central to Wordsworth’s earlier poetry, and which, for the Wordsworth of the present moment, ‘Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn’ (l. 4). This opinion about the change in Wordsworth’s career was shared with Wordsworth’s audience generally; as Richard Holmes states, after its publication ‘Wordsworth’s *Excursion* [...] was passed from hand to hand with frowns of disapproval’.⁸⁸

Shelley uses Wordsworth’s own motif of a mourning for the ‘sweet dreams’ (l. 4) of youth to demonstrate his disappointment in Wordsworth’s current work. It is Shelley’s opinion that Wordsworth’s position is hypocritical, as he ‘hast wept to know | That things depart which may never return’ (ll. 1-2) when this regret is centred around common experience. However, when the change involves Wordsworth’s own (negatively) changing style, he ‘feel’s’t’ (l. 6), but does not ‘deplore’ (l. 6) it, as Shelley does.

The second section of the sonnet presents a comparison between the power Wordsworth’s achievements as a young poet and his reputation later in his career. Shelley writes:

Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
On some frail bark in winter’s midnight roar:
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave

⁸⁸ Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 274.

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Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,—
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

(ll. 7-14)

Shelley presents the ideal poetic figure in Wordsworth's early career similarly to his representation of Coleridge: the poet is supposed to be 'a lone star' (l. 7), independent, but a figure unobscured by others. He extends this metaphor, stating that Wordsworth's 'light did shine | On some frail bark in midnight winter's roar' (ll. 7-8), presenting him as a significant and protective figure to guide the 'frail' (l. 8) in times of danger, shining 'light' (l. 7) on common experiences for others to relate to and find solace in. Shelley emphasises the stability of Wordsworth as a poetic figure, stating 'Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood | Above the blind and battling multitude' (ll. 9-10), framing him as a figure of political stability, a 'rock-build refuge' (l. 9) in a period which experienced significant social and political turbulence.

Unlike 'the blind and battling multitude' (l. 10), it is implied that Wordsworth 'sees' due to his rationality, using the power of words to enlighten society rather than the force of revolution. Shelley reinforces the link between poetry and politics by referring to the poet's 'honoured poverty' (l. 11), a state of humility in which the poet can be seen as more relatable to the people than to the aristocracy. He mixes the metaphors of sound and materials, stating that 'thy voice did weave | Songs to consecrate truth and liberty,—' (ll. 11-2), implying that Wordsworth's verse was powerful to make concrete with that which was not tangible, and to achieve feats of 'truth and liberty' (l. 12) which are complex, abstract concepts.

Shelley's celebration of Wordsworth's poetic career turns in the final two lines. He describes Wordsworth 'deserting these' (l. 13) qualities of his 'honoured' (l. 11) poetry, as he

is no longer using his poetry for the noble purposes which Shelley believes that it should be used for. The final line, 'Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.' (l. 14) seals the fate of Wordsworth's legacy in this poem— like a dead man, Wordsworth's career was something that had 'been' (l. 14) but now 'cease[s] to be' (l. 14), and now lives a metaphorical living death after his break from the so-called true definition of the poet. Richard Holmes highlights that Wordsworth's negative reception from the public is a significant moment for Shelley's conception of his own career— he states that 'The image of what Wordsworth had once been [...] reflected a continuing literary-political ambition for what Shelley himself might become'.⁸⁹ This poem serves to demonstrate Shelley's view of legacies and the longevities of the poetic career, as he shows that poetic legacies can in fact be a negative reflection on an artist's career, and it can serve to tarnish a reputation that was once respected and used as a template for younger poets to follow.

While Wordsworth's legacy is portrayed by Shelley as a living death and an example of a legacy ruined while a poet is still living and producing art, Shelley's portrayal of Keats portrays an inverse scenario. For Shelley, Keats is an example of a poet whose poetic career and future has been cut short prematurely and who can (as opposed to Wordsworth) be permanently remembered in the prime of his artistic career. In a letter, Shelley describes the production of his poem memorialising Keats, 'Adonais', written in 1821:

I have been engaged these last days in composing a poem on the death of Keats, which will shortly be finished [...] It is a highly wrought *piece of art*, and perhaps better, in point of comparison, than anything I have written⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, p. 274

⁹⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley and Shirley Carter Hughson, *The Best Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Shirley Carter Hughson (London: Heinemann, 1909), p. 266. All subsequent references are to this edition.

This comment sheds light on the dual-purpose of Shelley's artistic works concerning legacy, as the poems both comment upon the legacies and work of the poet being commemorated, but the poem itself is being created within this process. It appears that Shelley, in considering the legacy of Keats, is improving his own work, and that even engaging with Keats as a subject has elevated his own style, and in turn, his own legacy.

In 'Adonais', Shelley continues to explore the notion of a poet's artistic legacy while commemorating the life and career of Keats after his premature death. Shelley represents Keats through the poetic conceit of the Greek god Adonis. Korie Beth Brown describes the death of Adonis as having mythological significance, stating 'He died in Aphrodite's arms, returning to the underworld for good. Hearing Aphrodite's sobs, the entire world mourned the loss of such beauty'.⁹¹ Shelley combines the pathos of the death of Adonis from the myth (a form which combines supposed historic recollection with the art of storytelling) with poetry's loss, reinforcing the notion that poetry is ever-connected to the classical world which is explored in *A Defence of Poetry*.

The classicist Sarah Annes Brown demonstrates how Shelley is moving away from Romantic traditions in poetry through his use of classical mythology as an allusion, stating 'The first generation of Romantic poets moved far more decidedly away from almost all manifestations of neoclassicism'.⁹² 'The next generation of Romantic poets,' however, 'notably Byron, Shelley, and Keats, turned round the fortunes of Greek myth in English literature.'⁹³ While using some of the poetic archetypes of the younger generation of Romantic poets, such as the romanticising of the troubled Byronic style of the poetic life expressed through mythical allusions (aligning with Brown's theory) Shelley combines the

⁹¹ Korie Beth Brown, 'Adonis: The Greek God of Beauty and Desire' *History Cooperative*, 25 September 2020. <<https://historycooperative.org/adonis-greek-god-of-beauty-and-desire/>> [Accessed 6 May 2023].

⁹² Sarah Annes Brown, "'Hail, Muse! *Et Cetera*': Greek Myth in English and American Literature' in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. by Roger D. Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 425-52 (pp. 429-30).

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 430.

classical attitudes of the older and younger generations of Romantic poets, as he returns to the natural world to remember Keats, but synthesises this with the extended motifs of Greek mythology. Shelley introduces the weight of this mythological grief in his first stanza, exclaiming:

I weep for Adonais— he is dead!
O, weep for Adonais! though our tears
Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!
And thou, sad Hour, selected from all years
To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,

(ll. 1-5)

Shelley begins the stanza with his mournful refrain for Keats, exclaiming in this first monosyllabic sentence the fact of his death. This simple, primitive way of declaring one's grief is then quickly developed by Shelley in his following lines, where he employs the extended metaphors of time and nature comparatively to explore how cruel it is that Keats has been taken from the world. His personification of the 'sad Hour' (l. 4), describing both the literal time that the world was deprived of his life, and extending this grief to the time that marks out the day, demonstrates this grief as one that does not discriminate between the real and the constructed – that even the markers by which one measures life has been corrupted by his death.

This abstract sense of life is directly contrasted by the previous lines, where the speaker combines the physical act of crying with the metaphoric 'frost' (l. 3) of grief that our collective 'tears' (l. 2) 'Thaw not' (l. 3). There is a sense in this line, through the impenetrable cold metaphors, that nature is acting against the emotion of the speaker— that

human grief cannot resolve the unwitting acts of nature to turn cold the vibrant life of ‘so dear a head’ (l. 3), just as we cannot control the dangerous and unfeeling cold of the weather. There is a suspension of hope in the enjambment between the second and third lines, where the reader hopes that the ‘tears | Thaw’ (ll. 2-3), which is quickly dashed by the sharp, monosyllabic ‘not’ (l. 3). Shelley suggests to the reader that his art must reflect the misery of the situation, and that he cannot recreate hope in the poem when there is none in the subject itself. Karen Weisman links the theme of mourning and poetry, stating:

his refusal to be cheered up by it stands as a potent insistence upon the remnants of what does remain. And what remains is art, and its continuity, and its traditions that can be incorporated, digested, and reconstituted.⁹⁴

Weisman is correct that this sense of ‘continuity’ saves the poem from overwhelming desolation.⁹⁵ It appears that in this stage of grief, the speaker finds more comfort in mourning Adonais than he does in finding hope for the future.

Shelley continues this theme, but this time using personification to make the death of Keats seem more personal (and therefore giving more personal responsibility) to the reader. He implores:

Where wert thou, mighty Mother, when he lay,
When thy Son lay, pierc’d by the shaft which flies
In darkness?

(ll. 10-12)

⁹⁴ Karen Weisman, ‘The lyricist’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 45-64 (p. 58).

⁹⁵ Ibid.



It appears that this personified image carries a double meaning, both to the feminised figure of ‘Mother’ (l. 10) Nature, whose child has been killed at a young age, but also the ‘thou’ (l. 10) referring to the poet’s reader. The speaker appeals to the ‘mighty Mother’ (l. 10), implying through a critical tone that the all-powerful figure did not save her beloved ‘Son’ (l. 11), instead leaving him fatally ‘pierc’d’ (l. 11) to die alone ‘In darkness’ (l. 12). This image contrasts expectations of motherhood, presenting an absent and uncaring mother instead of the nurturing one we would expect. This image confounds our sense of pity for Adonais— he has not only died before his time, but he has died alone, and neglected by the person who has his interests most at heart.

There is significance in the directly addressed ‘thou’ (l. 10) that Shelley consciously chooses: in a way, he criticises all of us for not nurturing and caring for Keats’ allegory Adonais, and while we judge the symbolic ‘Mother’ (l. 10) for neglecting her duties to look after her ‘Son’ (l. 11) Adonais, we in turn have done the same to Keats. We see in these lines that death is more complex than the dying and the living, with the mourning being left not just with grief, but with regret for their actions or lack thereof. Shelley implies that we, as a society, have neglected an artist that has now gone, and shows us that we cannot right this failure; we must view his works as ‘fading melodies | With which, like flowers that mock the corpse beneath’ (ll. 16-7). The speaker does not let this situation lie, piteous as it is; in the following stanza he repeats the poem’s refrain:

Oh, weep for Adonais— he is dead!

Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!

(ll. 19-20)

The speaker is not satisfied with the regret he has given the grieving mother, as he disturbs her sleep, just as Adonais' life has been disrupted prematurely, and demands for her to 'wake and weep' (l. 20).

By contrast to the optimistic tone of 'Ode to the West Wind', which gives a positive signal to the reader that the future will be brighter after the winter has passed, Shelley uses the motif of the changing of the seasons in 'Adonais' to instead evoke a sense of hopelessness and the futility of life since Keats' death. After describing nature's reaction to Keats' death in the preceding stanzas, he uses stanza 21 both as a declaration of this hopelessness, and as an opportunity for philosophical reflection on life. For Shelley, Keats's death arouses questions of life's futility; the caesura of the line 'Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene' (l. 184) represents these open-ended questions which cannot be answered simply within the form of just one poem, and instead they remain rhetorical and unanswered. For Shelley, this suggests a futility of life, that whether 'Great' (l. 185) or 'mean' (l. 185), we are all 'mass'd in death' (l. 186) in the same way. This sentiment is reflected in Shelley's extended metaphor in the stanza:

As long as skies are blue, fields are green,
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow.

(ll. 187-9).

The speaker explores the truths of the natural world— if 'Evening must usher night' (l. 188), then logic follows that the world will continue, and as long as nature plays its part in maintaining its consistency, then order will follow. However, this stanza takes a turn in its final line, as a contrast to 'Ode to the West Wind', as the future doesn't bring positivity, but



‘woe’ (l. 189) and ‘sorrow’ (l. 189). The implication here is that, now a genius such as Keats has been taken from the world, what kind of future will society ‘wake’ (l. 189) to — one that seems ordinary and following expectations, but a soulless world where anything good may be taken at any time. Like the world that the speaker is portraying, the poem itself reflects this predictability in form, with the refrain ‘weep for Adonais’ (l. 1) occurring in some form at the beginning of many of the poem’s stanzas and mimicking the natural cycles that the speaker describes, and which is a phrase of consistency used to reinforce a sense of grief to the reader. However, like the world that the speaker portrays, the references are inconsistent and without pattern, such as the waves of grief are, leaving the reader searching for consistency where we think predictability might be, but ultimately being let down in this search by the unpredictability of the world.

This sense of unpredictability that has entered into the poem is mitigated near to the poem’s close. In stanzas 39-41, after describing Adonais’ fatal wounds and death in this mythological metaphor, Shelley inverts the natural conception of death as a finality. He reveals that even though Adonais has physically departed, he has not died, subverting the poem’s purpose as an elegy:

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep—
He hath awakened from the dream of life—
‘Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance, strike with our spirit’s knife
Invulnerable nothings.— *We* decay
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
Convulse us and consume us day by day,

Shelley inverts the imagery of the first line of the poem, 'I weep for Adonais— he is dead!' (l. 1), using both the parenthesis and exclamatory tone of the line but in different places. This time the exclamation is not one of horror and grief, but one of 'peace' (l. 343)— the speaker tells that 'He [i.e. Keats] hath awakened from the dream of life' (l. 344), suggesting that, rather than heaven being another dream-like realm, it is we who are dreaming, and this implies that Keats has escaped into the 'real' world after death. The speaker claims that "'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions [...] We decay' (ll. 345-48), presenting the world as a sort of living death that we have to toil to survive through, using the metaphor of 'fear and grief | Convulse us and consume us day by day' (ll. 349-50) and it is the world that slowly kills us with its unpleasantness, not death. This subversion disturbs us, as it disrupts the foundation that our world is built on, that there is a concretely repeatable cycle of birth, life, and death which comes to us all, and which we all expect. Shelley allays these fears however, showing us that there is no need to grieve for Keats, in stanza 53:

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?
 Thy hopes are gone before: from all things here
 They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!
 A light is passed from the revolving year,
 And man, and woman; and what is still dear
 Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither.
 The soft sky smiles,— the low wind whispers near,
 'Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither,
 No more let Life divide what Death can join together.

The syntax of the first line reflects the speaker's consternation about this revelation, with each 'why' (l. 469) with its corresponding action growing stronger as the clauses evolve, with the hesitant 'linger' (l. 469) evolving to 'shrink' (l. 469). However, the addition of 'my Heart' (l. 469) brings us back to the emotion of the poem— that these thoughts about death and legacy are not just hypothetical, but concern of a lost figure, well-loved by the speaker, who dies before their time. The 'Heart' (l. 469), a symbol for love and feeling within the body, makes the stakes more personal, involving the intimate feelings of the speaker.

Shelley in the next three lines further emphasises the difficult elements of grief, with his images varying from the constancy of the world, to the inversion of the stability that this constancy brings into destruction; the 'light is passed from the revolving year' (l. 472) evokes Shelley's interest in the seasons, as the constancy of the 'revolving year' (l. 472), which goes through its cycles of the warm to cold months, and beginning to end, is not effected by the comparative minutiae of human death, and he states that it, like 'man, and woman' (l. 473) 'Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither' (l. 474). The speaker is disillusioned by a world where an attractive constancy can cause pain, where the seasons and the life cycle continues thoughtlessly even during the trauma of human life and death, and when close intimate relationships inevitably cause pain through their ending, be it through 'Life' (l. 477) or 'Death' (l. 477).

The speaker's solace can only be given by the presence of Adonais, and this uncaring world around him changes, evoked by the alliteration of the 'soft sky smiles' (l. 475), with the personified world, with its 'whispers' (l. 475) and 'smiles' (l. 475) being lulled into the realms of human compassion. The message that we are given by Adonais' presence, 'No more let Life divide what Death can join together' (l. 477) feels difficult to comprehend,

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balancing the reassurance that death can be viewed as a positive, and welcoming experience, but yet disturbing that this experience must come at the cost of the ending of a life. However, the poem reassures us that this is positive, and that this ‘divide’ (l. 477) of stability of thought that grief has caused within the poem, and the tensions that arise around death, does not need to be felt. Adonais, the figure that we and his metaphorical mother were called to ‘weep’ (l. 1) for at the beginning of the poem, now comforts us from his grave.

Shelley introduces Adonais as a character within the present tense at the end of the poem, and Shelley uses him as a symbol of hope. This device is used so that, if ever someone dead could speak to the living, the poem is a tool in which Shelley enables Adonais to say to us what would most comfort the living, giving a voice to the dead in a way that makes us remember their presence, to cement their legacy. This is what Shelley achieves in the poem for Keats, with his conceit of Adonais bringing comfort to us, reminding us that, despite our grief after the passing of Keats, that ‘Death’ (l. 477) may be a more comforting and peaceful state than the suffering that we endure while living.

In a contrast to his criticisms of Wordsworth’s work, Shelley uses his private letters about Keats to defend Keats’s legacy. Shelley’s letter to Charles Ollier detailing the completion of ‘Adonais’ sees him describe a particular critical attack of Keats’ work shortly preceding his death, where refers to it as ‘the brutal attack in the Quarterly Review [which] excited the disease by which he perished’ (p. 267). In a later letter to the editor of this publication, Shelley criticises the severity with which Keats’ poem *Endymion* was reviewed, stating:

Surely the poem, with all its faults, is a very remarkable production for a man of Keats’s age, and the promise of ultimate excellence is such as has rarely been afforded even by such as afterwards attained high literary eminence

Shelley takes it upon himself, as a poet, to defend the legacy of Keats, demonstrating that (in Shelley's view) an artist's legacy is not dependent on total perfection, but 'the promise of ultimate excellence' (p. 272). The superlatives by which he describes his 'high' (p. 272) and 'remarkable' (p. 272) 'ultimate excellence' (p. 272) only further the tragedy of the stress that Shelley claims this criticism to have caused, evidenced by his description of 'Adonais' to Ollier as having 'some interposed stabs on the assassins of his peace and of his fame' (p. 276). His personification of Keats' critics as murderous 'assassins' (p. 276) reveals to us just how personal an artist's legacy can be, that a single critical view can be considered dangerous to the 'peace' (p. 276) and 'fame' (p. 276) of the artist.

Stephen C. Behrendt explores how there was a crisis in the poet's conception of their audience (and therefore how their poetic careers and legacies would be received) that was unique to the historical circumstances of the Romantic era. He states that:

Shelley stands at an important transitional point in the history of English author-audience relations, which changed drastically late in the eighteenth century with the decline of the patronage system and the rise of the largely self-supporting author addressing a rapidly expanding and diversifying reading public served by an equally rapidly diversifying print media.⁹⁶

The expansion of the culture of the printing press presents a metaphorical double-edged sword to poets such as Shelley – while this new method of technology is now acquiring new

⁹⁶ Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 4.



readerships which could both financially support a poet's work and which could improve a poet's reputation within unexplored subsets of society, it also injected an element of chaos into the poet's well established practices. Behrendt also argues that:

Liberal English authors writing between 1817 and 1822 — the most productive years of Shelley's career — found increasingly that their commitment to the public cause was vitiated by the seeming dissolution of any clearly definable homogenous reading public into a daunting multiplicity of potential publics. Since literary activity in these circumstances tended to become at once "both impersonal and privatized," these writers frequently were left without any clear view of who their actual readers might be and with a disheartening sense of the scarcity of ideal readers. They were left, in other words, with audiences of virtual readers whom they needed in large measure to invent.⁹⁷

Shelley's inability to cultivate either popularity or the loyalty of a cult following naturally lent itself to the creation of his own philosophy of poetry. If the poet could not accumulate popularity, and if the difficulties in commanding and satisfying the needs of a large group of followers were unachievable (such as in Wordsworth's case) it would be more productive to create in line with one's own beliefs and for the purposes that one wants to. While Shelley's poetry was not contemporaneously popular, it maintained the conviction of belief in which it was created with – while he did not become a famous poet in his own time, he largely retained power over his own compositions, and cultivated a circle in which his ideas could be expressed most productively. Consequently, Shelley's career shows us the positives of

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 4.

unpopularity, reaffirming that conviction and freedom are more important (and liberating) qualities for poetry than that of popularity.

Overall, Shelley's poems which concern the legacies of his Romantic contemporaries demonstrate an awareness that the concept of legacy is complex, and they acknowledge that a variety of factors contribute to the formation of a legacy. It is difficult to concretely determine whether a poet's legacy is wholly positive or negative, as the indicators by which we measure these legacies, such as critical, commercial, or material success, are contradicting factors. A technically skilled poet who advocates for social causes which are important will not necessarily have their achievements reflected in the money or lack of fame which they are left with. Moreover, a poet's legacy is not static, and the judgement of their artistic success can change throughout time, both within the artist's lifetime and posthumously, and this judgement can be due to new biographical information, or through the shifting perspectives and expectations of each generation or following literary movement.

It is difficult to say how far Shelley himself fulfilled his own criteria for a popular poetic legacy as set out in *A Defence of Poetry*, due to his poetic works not being overwhelmingly popular or critically acclaimed during his lifetime in comparison to his contemporaries. Despite this factor, Shelley does fill the requirements which he provides for Coleridge in 'O! there are spirits of the air', where he states that it is the creativity and authenticity of the poet which is the most significant, as shown through the need to improve society and to produce artistic works which are thoughtful and resonate with their audience, rather than cultivating their art for a legacy which they may not live to see, and which may not ultimately truly reflect their talents.

Paul Foot highlights the advantages of a poet such as Shelley examining the careers of his poetic predecessors and contemporaries, stating that the trajectories of 'Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth [...] haunted him and deterred him from sliding back from his

convictions'.⁹⁸ This sense of comparison is, for Shelley, the most productive use of comparison between a poet's own work and that of their predecessors. Shelley used the failings of previous poets as a metaphorical yardstick to ensure that his own career remain untarnished by either a need to pander to popular trends, or to adapt one's own convictions to suit other tastes.

In his poetry, Shelley presents various examples of poetic careers, portraying unnamed conceptions of his Romantic counterparts as having unfulfilled legacies. In a letter to Joseph Severn, Shelley reflects on his writing of 'Adonais', stating that:

In spite of his transcendental genius, Keats never was, nor ever will be, a popular poet; and the total neglect and obscurity in which the astonishing remnants of his mind still lie, was hardly to be dissipated by a writer who, however he may differ from Keats in more important qualities, at least resembles him in that accidental one, a want of popularity.⁹⁹

Although in hindsight, Shelley's assertion that Keats would never achieve the status of the 'popular poet' (p. 187) is incorrect, his comments suggest a division which is found throughout his poems on poetic legacy—there is a difference between the 'transcendental genius' (p. 187) of a poet who is highly respected by his community, but not by the public as a whole, and the 'want of popularity' (p. 187) which Shelley and Keats shared. While Shelley's tone in the letter is self-effacing, it suggests that this cause was a worthy one, and the fault of 'the total neglect and obscurity' (p. 187) of their society rather than a fault in his abilities. It appears from this letter that Keats died within the spirit of Shelley's message to

⁹⁸ Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980), p. 214.

⁹⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Select Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Richard Garnett (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, 1882), p. 187. All subsequent references are to this edition.

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Coleridge in ‘O! there are spirits of the air’ – that, while wanting the ‘popularity’ (p. 187) which he would ultimately never gain in his lifetime, he died with the admiration of his peers and the integrity of his artistic perspective intact.

This letter also reveals a more pressing consideration around the discussion of poetic legacy. Earlier in the letter, while discussing his writing of ‘Adonais’ and his hopes that the poem will represent his legacy accurately, Shelley expresses his concerns about his own poetic ability, and questions both his poetic talent and the likelihood of there being an audience for this poem. He says:

I send you the elegy on poor Keats, and I wish it were better worth your acceptance [...] I have ventured to express, as I felt, the respect and admiration which your conduct towards him demands. [...] I have little hope, therefore, that the poem I send you will excite any attention, nor do I feel assured that a critical notice of his writings would find a single reader.

(p. 187)

The process of composing ‘Adonais’ naturally led Shelley to question his own creative abilities, and whether this poem would be of any interest to the wider public. As Shelley states, he is a poet with ‘a want of popularity’ (p. 187) just as Keats was, so if his own elegy of Keats is seen as a creative failure, this would naturally beg the question of whether Shelley himself would be elegised after his death, and whether this hypothetical poem would in turn be disregarded by society.

Consequently, any discussion around poetic legacy, whether for Shelley or any of his contemporaries, is a discussion of the self. Poetic legacy becomes a mirror into which the

poet can project their own anxieties around remembrance after death, and the desire to become memorialised in a poetic canon. Paul Hamilton comments that:

This is one charge to which *A Defence of Poetry* replied, reassuring Shelley against the neglect of his peers. The gap, however, between poetry's success as a midwife of the truth to be recognized by future audiences and that for which the poet can take personal credit now, acquiring poetic fame and reputation, is as disturbingly wide as the historical gap to be crossed by the poet's voyage at the end of *Adonais*.¹⁰⁰

Hamilton's statement reveals a conflict in our conception of legacy, between, as he states, 'truth' and 'acquiring poetic fame and reputation' which cannot be reconciled within one poetic career.¹⁰¹ This is the struggle which Shelley highlights in 'O! there are spirits of the air'—that one can either be true to their own instincts, or they can prioritise coveting the approval of others. Furthermore, the notion of an artist worrying about their own legacy is negated— the very nature of poetic legacy is that it lies in a future state, predicated on the death of the artist, and is to be determined by people who may not yet be living, in a culture that may be unfamiliar to one's own. A preoccupation with legacy in any sense will naturally affect a poet's output, as seen through Shelley's judgments of Coleridge and Wordsworth in his poetry. However, it is the legacy of Keats that appears to be the most satisfying to Shelley— that one should die young, within the prime of one's life, and before having the opportunity to disappoint one's audience.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Hamilton, 'Literature and philosophy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 166-84 (p. 169).

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Conclusion:

By looking at Shelley's critical reception from the distance of our post-modern society, we can evaluate how successful Shelley was in fulfilling the poetical aims set out in his 1821 essay *A Defence of Poetry*. Paul Hamilton reflects that 'Considered from a philosophical point of view, Percy Shelley's writings are most intriguing because they so signally look both backwards and forwards in the history of philosophy'.¹⁰² Hamilton's notion could be applied to all of Shelley's work, particularly the poems concerned with political suffrage, and his views on morality and feminism which resonate more which those predominantly found in our society today. Hamilton comments on longevity when discussing Shelley's philosophical ideals for the poet, stating: 'Confined to a world of Becoming and generation, the poet longs, impossibly, for a life of Being and eternity'.¹⁰³

Shelley's poetry combines the factors of poetic artistry, politics, and legacy which are deemed so significant by *A Defence of Poetry*. In this philosophy, poetic artistry acts as the foundations of any poetic subtext, embellishing messages with skilled methods of imagery and form which allows the poet's message to be conveyed in a way which is polished, and which is convincing to its reader. The artistic elements of a poem should be technically nuanced, allowing for a breadth of interpretation. It is from this basis which political poetry can thrive, with Shelley's in particular being an example of political poetry which leans on its strong, evocative imagery to portray the suffering of poorer people and the greed of the higher classes, setting out a case which is highly emotional and clear to any empathetic reader. Political poetry reveals poetry's dual purpose: not only can poetry serve as an art form which is beautiful, and can be appreciated for its technical intricacy, the technical artistic

¹⁰² Paul Hamilton, 'Literature and philosophy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 166-84 (p. 166).

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 167.

skills which are sharpened throughout a poet's career can be leant to something useful— to conveying a message more effectively digested through the medium of poetry.

In Shelley's view, it is the combination of a poet's artistic and political talents which combine to create a poetic legacy— judged not only on how technically adept an artist is, but also on how they use this talent to impact society through their poetry. An artist's legacy, however, proves to be a complex notion to define, as any judgement of a poet's legacy uses a subjective judgement, which may change with the values and aesthetics of each generation. An artist's legacy is not fixed, and it will certainly be criticised by future generations. There is not necessarily a correlation between an artist's own view of their future legacy and poetic output and the views of their peers or future generations. By examining Shelley's opinions on the reputations of his peers, his poetry elucidates his perception of the ideal legacy. It is evident that the ideal poet would follow the principles which Shelley set out in *A Defence of Poetry*, would practice their craft to create art which is aesthetically resonant, would use this art to inspire positive change in society, and would be faithful to their own principles in their artistic output. Having followed these principles, the poet would be fulfilling their own destiny, and regardless of the material or social following that they may or may not achieve, the poet will have a legacy which is well-deserved, which reflects their own morality, and which, in Shelley's view, would be more valuable than pandering to the demands of the masses.

A Defence of Poetry explicitly states poetry's virtues, citing its long lineage through classical poets such as Homer and Virgil, and traces this link through to the works of Shakespeare and Milton. He states in the essay that 'what is called Poetry in a restricted sense has a common source with all other forms of order and of beauty'. In Shelley's philosophy, poetry is made up of 'order' (p. 677), the rational setting out of arguments and beliefs within the set forms of a poem, and of 'beauty' (p. 677), which is the expression of beautiful things,



whether that be in human or natural form, delivered in beautiful ways, such as simile and metaphors. Shelley has high standards for the requirements of the ideal poet—he states that ‘A Poet, as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory, so he ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest and the most illustrious of men.’ (pp. 675-6). He elevates the role of the poet not only in modern society, but throughout history, stating: ‘As to his glory, let Time be challenged to declare whether the fame of any other institutor of human life be comparable to that of a poet.’ (p. 676). It is Shelley’s view that poetry is a record of human achievement, and through the effects of consciously written, impactful poetry, it is a form which can further impact the human achievement of the future.

By this definition, it can be argued that Shelley does fulfil the broad principles which he set out for the ideal poet. While Shelley was not recognised with considerable fame until after his death, it is a testament to his poetry that he is still remembered today, and remembered in league with his poetic peers who were more famous or whose poetry was more widely bought or distributed within the Regency period. Furthermore, it is significant that he is remembered as a poet who is preoccupied with the definition of what a poet is, what a poet should do, and how a poet should be remembered. His contribution to poetry is that it can be a form which both feels as spontaneous as the skylark’s song, which feels as personal as if it were the reader’s own experiences, and yet which can be so consciously aware of its own impact, both on the poetic world and upon wider society.

In some respects, as we view Shelley’s legacy today, his poetic career is an example for other poets to disregard their concerns about legacy, as it is overwhelmingly dictated by the opinions of a culture which you do not belong to, and of which your poetic work was not created for. In his example of ‘To Wordsworth’, it is clear that a preoccupation with legacy and reputation is an entirely ‘un-poetic’ concept— a true artist who creates for their own passion would create only for the pleasure of it, and would have no regard for their

perception. In a letter to his friend Elizabeth Hitchener, Shelley discusses his opinions of poetic contemporary Robert Southey, stating:

You may conjecture that a man must possess high and estimable qualities if, with the prejudices of such total difference from my sentiments, I can regard him great and worthy. In fact, Southey is an advocate of liberty and equality. He looks forward to a state when all shall be perfected, and matter become subjected to omnipotence of mind. But he is now an advocate for existing establishments.¹⁰⁴

Shelley believes that, despite any differences in poetic style or opinion, the most important factor for a poet's career should be a belief in 'liberty and equality' (p. 10). It is evident that the consequences of one's poetic work (e.g. the cause it champions, or the beliefs that it conveys) are the most significant criterion, as it is both a representation that the poet has firmly held moral beliefs which they are willing to publicise to the world, despite possible negative ramifications for their career (as Shelley advises Coleridge to do in 'O! there are spirits of the air'), but it also shows that a poetic career can serve as a vocation to improve the lives of others. In this quote, Shelley touches upon the future (or legacy) that a poet will leave behind, which combines both the poet's creativity and vocations, stating that 'He looks forward to a state when all shall be perfected' (p. 10). Shelley embellishes his opinions of Southey, stating:

But Southey, though far from being a man of great reasoning powers, is a great man. He has all that characterises the poet; great eloquence, though obstinacy in opinion,

¹⁰⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Select Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Richard Garnett (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, 1882), p. 10. All subsequent references are to this edition.

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which arguments are the last thing that can shake. He is a man of virtue. He will never belie what he thinks, his professions are in compatibility with his practice.

(p. 11)

Despite Shelley's own intellect, he argues that it is not intelligence that is a prerequisite for a 'great' (p. 11) poet— it is the ability to hold firm beliefs, to be able to articulate these in ways which are palatable, yet thought-provoking for others to read, and who will spend his career supporting and fulfilling these beliefs through his work.

Returning to Shelley's conceptions of legacy in 'Ozymandias' in the light of my analysis shows that the poem acts as a warning for the artist, or for any figure seeking to build a legacy of their own. The poem reconciles with the passage of time in a way that is pessimistic, yet we can read into this a sense of realism which allays the concerns of the poet during the act of creation. If, like Ramses II, works are doomed to become a 'colossal Wreck', becoming criticised or condemned by new societies who disregard outdated values as outdated, it is better to enjoy the act of creation in the moment rather than to be concerned with memorialisation. Through the pathos of Ozymandias' statue – once great and admired and now crumbled in obscurity– we see our own mortality.

However, through this examination of Shelley's other works in light of his artistic, political concerns, which both contribute to the legacy which he considers, we can view 'Ozymandias' in a more positive light. While Ozymandias' legacy seems forgotten to antiquity, his memory 'yet survive[s]' (l. 7)— his statue, as a piece of artwork, still exists (albeit in its broken state), just as the poem revives his identity in the modern age. While at first glance, the reader's instinct may be to pity the forgotten leader of a once powerful land, in terms of remembrance and legacy, it is irrelevant whether; just as the fictionalised speaker

and the traveller see the broken statue of Ozymandias and retell his history, so too does the poem retell his story, and has popularised him as a figure in recent decades.

Earl J. Schulze explores the wider implications of Shelley's poetic beliefs in relation to the artistic and the physical worlds he inhabits, stating that:

Poetry seemed to everyone, in other words, uncompromisingly human in origin, nature, and effect. The implications of this elevation are far-reaching and complex. Though often overlooked, one of the most immediate is that it provides his deliberations, however soaring, with a this-worldly bias [...] The realities opened up by poetry are inconceivable without the participation of poets and readers: they are realities here and now and have reference to a human, if not always personal, identity. One of the consequences of this is belief in the autonomy of art.¹⁰⁵

Schulze sets out a contrast between the view of earlier Romantic poets that poetry was 'uncompromisingly human in origin, nature, and effect' and Shelley's blending of the natural with his 'soaring' style.¹⁰⁶ However, it is Shelley's view that poetry is innately moral and political, and that poetry has always been used for these purposes— for Shelley, writing poetry is an inherently political act, and it is a form which is always (in the case of good poetry) imbued with the morality of the poet. Therefore, it is difficult to draw a distinction between Shelley and other poets, because (in Shelley's view) there is no distinction between the natural and the moral poet— there are either poets who fulfil the duties of a poet as set out in his *Defence*, or there are poets who fail to achieve this.

¹⁰⁵ Earl J. Schulze, *Shelley's Theory of Poetry: A Reappraisal*, Studies in English Literature, XIII (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1966), p. 13.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

The three significant qualities of Shelley's poetry discussed in this thesis all contribute to Shelley's legacy beyond the nineteenth century. Jeffrey C. Robinson links Shelley's modern readers with particular qualities in his poetic career: 'They saw his existence on the periphery of society, his exile, and his early death by drowning as standing for a life, a self, sacrificed to poetry and the political ideas embedded in it'.¹⁰⁷ Robinson's comments emphasize Shelley's authenticity, as the reader finds his canon of poetical work to be underpinned by an ideology, set out in *A Defence of Poetry*, and which gives his work a sense that it is working toward something larger than purely creative output, such as using poetry to help inspire political change. Robinson further argues 'That Shelley, as a quintessential Romantic poet, became a lightning rod for their [modern poets'] continued acts of becoming and renewing [...] That is, Shelley seems to have inspired an immediacy or presentness in the making of their poems'.¹⁰⁸ If this notion is accurate, it appears that a poet's long-term legacy can be developed beyond their own body of work, as the work of a great artist has the power to inspire further creativity posthumously. While in life, death is synonymous with finality, the poetic life can be unending, with the cycle of reading and re-reading works across generations giving each individual poem a symbolic rebirth. In respect to Shelley's own poetic career, it is easy to draw a link between his untimely death in 1822, and the rebirth of his ideals and works that publishing has allowed. Poetry, in a sense, is never-ending, and has no sense of finality.

Consequently, the examples that I have chosen from Shelley's poetry and his non-fiction work show a poet who was consciously trying to adhere to the poetic principles which he set out in *A Defence of Poetry*. While it may be debateable to the extent of which he was able to fulfil these principles in his own short lifetime, my analysis shows that Shelley's

¹⁰⁷ Jeffrey C. Robinson, 'The Influence of Shelley on Twentieth- and Twenty-First-century Poetry' in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Michael O'Neill, Anthony Howe, and Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 627-44 (p. 632).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 643.



poetical works as a whole aim to address all of his criterion. His lyric poems, primarily addressing the factor of poetic artistry, provide utopian models for the poet to be influenced by, but not to be dissuaded by its unachievable standards of nature's seemingly perfect creators. Each natural being, whether it be the skylark, the cloud, or the wind has within its portrayal a freedom that the poet cannot imagine— a freedom from society to create as it wishes. This is unachievable for the poet.

Nevertheless, Shelley's poetic philosophy is one that aims to the highest of principles. His principles in *A Defence of Poetry* deem poetry as a form which is worthy of elevation, which can enable the discussion of ideals which are both culturally significant, but also aesthetically significant. He states that:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most deformed [...] It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes.

(p. 675)

Poetry has the power, according to Shelley, not only to change the world itself, but to change itself in service to the world — it 'transmutes' both figuratively and literally within its form. The form has a power above that of humanity alone, it 'turns all things to loveliness' through only words. While the poet may not be automatically afforded the freedom to create as it wishes, as the skylark can, the poet has ultimate freedom over their own creation (and, therefore, the freedom to destroy their poetic reputation too). For Shelley, it is not only a tool that provides the great power of personal expression, but it allows the poet to represent voices or events which have been unheard or suppressed. His work demonstrates that poetry can play a vital role in conveying the views of suppressed causes to a large audience, not only



informing them of the plight of others, but encouraging an exploration of empathy – the ‘wondrous sympathy’ (p. 675) he speaks of. This adherence to artistic and political principles naturally leads to the creation of a reputation, and later a legacy, which reflects an artist’s adherence to these rules. However, a short-term, monetarily inspired legacy is not what is crucial to Shelley’s belief system, but it is a more enduring legacy which involves a committal to one’s beliefs. The successful poet is not one who covets fame or rewards, but it is one who is committed to poetry’s importance as an art form, as an agent of change, and as a force for the better. Shelley is an example of such a poet.



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