

Shelley and the Breathless Sleep

A Study of the Images of Death and Religion in Percy B. Shelley's Poetry

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C-Essay

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Abstract

In this essay, I analyze the way Shelley uses death and afterlife in his poetry. Some of the passages I discuss, especially in the first chapter, might seem a bit superfluous, but I want to study all the various ways he deals with the concept of death, to see his take on it from every possible angle. I examine Shelley's way of using the concept of consciousness beyond death in his poetry. My focus is to see whether the way he talks about the afterlife contradicts his atheistic beliefs and the argument is that the way he uses death in his poetry does not indicate that he believed that there is a possibility of any consciousness beyond physical death.

Keywords: Shelley, death, atheism, Romantic poetry

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Introduction

The eighteenth century was a melting pot of ideologies and new, radical ways to perceive the world. With such thinkers as Hume, Kant and Rousseau and events like the French Revolution many of the old ideas were put in question and much of what we today consider modern thinking started to develop. According to Theodore Redpath, these occurrences had an important influence on the Romantic movement, and shaped the thoughts of the fictional writers as well as the journalists and philosophers. As Redpath explains, the early Romantic poets in Britain, as Blake and Wordsworth, had based their philosophy on Christianity. However, the following generation that sprung up during the second decade of the 1800's developed more cosmopolitan, or even atheistic ideas (22). Among these younger and more radical writers, Shelley is well known for his dedication to atheism and the war against Christian society. He held a strong fascination for religion, existence and death. The latter is a theme in the majority of his poems, whatever the main theme may be.

While Shelley was a devoted atheist it is somewhat surprising that not only decay, but also various forms of afterlife play a vital role in his poetic works. It seems as though, he usually uses supernatural themes either as poetic decoration or to mock the religious beliefs of his peers. In this essay I wish to prove that the way Shelley writes about death in his poetry does not indicate that he believed that any consciousness beyond physical death is possible. I think that he stayed true to his religious beliefs and that when he talks about death in form of a conscious existence, there are clearly irreligious, or even contrareligious motives behind it.

To make the discussion more clear, I have divided my essay into three chapters after the themes of death I have found within Shelley's poetry. In the first chapter I look at how he talks about physical decay as a gruesome matter-of-fact. In chapter two, I discuss how he uses sleep as a metaphor for death, and whether this is a purely aesthetic image. In the third and

last chapter I examine how he uses the concept of heavenly existence in his poetry to mock the Christian beliefs.

To explore this further, I have chosen to work with the seven poems I found examine this subjects most thoroughly; "Queen Mab" and "Adonais" are used as the bases for my work and I also support my claims through analyzing "Ode to Heaven," "Lift Not the Painted Veil," "Mont Blanc," "A Summer Evening in a Church Yard" and "Alastor" as these poems explore the subject a bit further than most. In order to support my claim, I will also look into the way Shelley writes about death in some of his prose, as well as consult some renowned scholars.

Chapter 1: Death as decay

Decay is the assigned destiny of any mortal body, and seen as the final end by an atheist by today's definition of the word. In the early nineteenth century, the term atheist was quite new though, and much more obscure. According to Hyman, it rather indicated that someone was against a certain religion, usually Christianity, than that this person did not have any religious faith (4). Hyman tells us that in Shelley's time people had recently started to use it as an expression for their own beliefs and not only as an insult (6). On the other hand, Hoagwood claims that even though Shelley expresses thoughts as "beyond the limits of perceptions and of thought nothing can exist", he actually did not dismiss everything that could not be perceived by the human senses, but rather found them more unlikely to exist (16-17).

This opens for the possibility that Shelley was more of an agnostic, than what would be considered an atheist today. If this is the case, I doubt that he would talk about all forms of religion as something destructive, so from what I have read and seen he was an atheist after today's definition of the word, even though there are a few things in his prose that despite his references to religion as a destructive power, show that there may have been more flexibility to his beliefs. In "An Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte," he asks "What is death? Who dares to say that which will come after the grave?" (234). Considering the context; that he discusses the opinions which the common people had on the subject, I see this question as rhetorical, and not as a statement of an agnostic. Another statement that shows a more lenient attitude is a remark about Catholicism in "An Address to the Irish People," where Shelley writes that according to most thinkers he knows, the Catholic belief about purgatory is probably much closer to the truth than the Protestant view with only a Heaven and a Hell (16).

On the other hand in “A Refutation of Deism” he states two years later that the atheist “is not to be restrained by punishments, for death is divested of its terror “ (110), which points towards a more modern atheistic worldview. This could mean that his atheistic beliefs developed towards more modern ways, as well as the time passing between the two essays could have been a mere coincident. Whether he had a more agnostic belief, at least through some part of his life, is all but impossible to say, but in any case he was, as Hoagwood comments, of the mind that any higher supernatural force is highly improbable, and this is detectable also in the more religiously inspired poems, as we will see in the second and third chapter.

Shelley did not only write about the condition of the soul beyond death, but also about the deceased body. Words as “decay,” “putrefied” and “worm” show up in many of his poems. Considering his atheistic ways, this would probably portrait the way he saw the unavoidable death – that everyone will eventually feed the maggots. It could possibly be a way for him to treat uncomfortable feelings about this destiny.

The way he uses morbid images seems to be an artistic grasp to create strong emotion in the reader, and also to have been put there to create a grotesque contrast to the more traditional poetic images that are often included in the same verses. In “Adonais” he writes:

The leprous corpse touched by this spirit tender
 Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath;
 Like incarnations of the stars, when splendour
 Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death
 And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath (172-176)

The way he mixes morbid expressions as “macabre corpse” with gentle images as “tender spirit,” and ties the positive adjective “merry” to the negative noun “worm” creates a

confusion in the reader. The verse becomes repulsive and appealing at the same time, and I think it is this effect he is reaching for.

He uses the same method of combining the beautiful and the grotesque in the opening of "Queen Mab." In this poem Shelley is telling us about a mythological journey which the soul of the mortal Ianthe is taken on. The fairy queen takes her to see the past, the present and the future, and on the way Ianthe learns about the ways the human race is destroying the world around them as well as how religion is the root of all evil.

In the first part, where Ianthe has fallen asleep, Shelley talks about the possibility that she might be dead, and that if this is the case all her beauty must perish and her wonderful body must decay. He talks about this with a dramatic sadness, and it is hard to say whether it is only to create a melancholic atmosphere, or if there is any other motif behind it. He actually describes the attributes of death as part of her current charm, but also the very things that will make her perish (I 14-25).

One must also remember that in the early nineteenth century pallidness and a weak body were considered decorative and feminine attributes, which makes it easier to understand how the characteristics of the recently deceased could be seen as something beautiful.

Without a beating heart, those azure veins
Which steal like streams along a field of snow,
That lovely outline, which is fair
As breathing marble, perish?
Must putrefactions breath
Leave nothing of this heavenly sight
But loathsomeness and ruin? (I 14-20)

In these lines, the physical death becomes something momentarily enchanting, but very dependent on time, in the same manner as youthful beauty tends to be described in poetry.

Later on, he compares the body and the soul. One immortal, forever strong and beautiful, and the other just a thing that will get worn out, thrown away and condemned to decay. The poem shows an impressive picture of the two mirror-like images that are so alike and yet each other's total opposites (I 131-156). I believe he uses these images to reach an artistic effect, based on the above mentioned ideas, and as a part of starting the mythological journey, rather than to express any deeper religious meanings. These events are so worked into the mythological story they have to be interpreted through this, rather than as solitary pieces.

Chapter three, four and five hold a very political motif. Monarchs are compared to parasites (III 99-120), and when it is stated a few lines later that they are to become worm food one day (III 144-149), it gives an image of parasites feeding on parasites. Shelley writes in chapter four that bad people will mould and their bones will be soil for a garden more beautiful than Eden (IV 87-88). A few lines later though he also states that people with evil minds could mould and feed trees that will poison future generations, and holds it as an ethical question that one would have to consider. He makes it a moral responsibility to avoid being a bad person and thereby become a destructive force after death (IV 237-265). This shows us another type of afterlife than the continuous conscious existence; the way a person's behaviour effects the following generations. This is however not relevant to this discussion.

By the end of "Alastor", Shelley is very carefully pointing out that the protagonist does not exist now when he is dead (686-714). He states that "Now are thou not" (699) and goes on to reflect on the fact that the poet cannot feel or know anything in his current state, but that this also means that he cannot experience the dark existence of the grave either. The verses here are very clear on the fact in the universe of "Alastor," death is a final point, after which no consciousness exists.

In "A Summer Evening in a Church Yard," the process of decay is described as something peaceful, yet filled with life. Here the dead are depicted as slowly moldering ones, while still

half awake (19-22), “half sense, half thought, among the darkness stirs, Breathed from their wormy beds all living things around” (21-22). This image seems somewhat grotesque, but is actually quite peacefully depicted. The dead are eternally dreaming, and the life the graves display could just as well point to the biological processes as to any conscious minds among the deceased. One possibility is that the living corpses are a metaphor for becoming one with nature, in the same way as in some of the newer religions of Eastern influence. Within Buddhism for example, everything is part of the Brahma and connected in a spiritual way, and this way of thinking has been adopted by New Age religions today. It is however unlikely that Shelley ever encountered this type of religion. In “Adonais,” there are references to the phenomena of becoming one with nature as well. Shelley writes in the forty second verse that

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
 His voice in all her music, from the moan
 Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
 He is a present to be felt and known (370-373)

As I will discuss in the next chapter though, the imagery of “Adonais” is too contradictive to put any serious thought into the religious discussions of the poem.

If the lines from “A Summer Evening in a Churchyard” is about becoming one with nature it seems like it would rather be in a physical way. There is nothing that says that it would have any supernatural meaning.

Chapter 2: Death as sleep

The image of death as some kind of sleep is common in literature, since, as Glancy points out, sleep is a well known euphemism for death. It appears frequently in Romantic poetry (245-246). It does not actually indicate any activity of soul or mind, and is therefore not contradicting atheism by itself. To see whether a statement like this is suggesting an unconventional activity, such as souls living on after death, one must examine the circumstances.

When Shelley writes about sleep, there is often a very thin line between an actual sleep and the euphemism for death mentioned above. In the opening of “Queen Mab“ he talks about “Death and his brother Sleep”(I 12) – an anthropomorphic relationship that has been frequently used in literature. According to Glancy it can be found in Greek mythology and in poetry (243-244) as well as in popular culture.

It is not easy to decipher whether Ianthe is actually dead or just sleeping very deeply during the first thirty lines of “Queen Mab.” Shelley finally concludes that she is going to wake again (I 31), but suspends stating whether she is alive or dead. By line 130 Ianthe’s soul awakes while her body keeps “sleeping”. The events that take place during this sleep could as well be experienced in a dream as in an out of body experience. If the latter is the case, it follows a very mythological pattern, where Ianthe’s soul is guided by Mab and encounters various spirits to learn about the physical and the spiritual world. The mythological aspects of this journey however, will be more thoroughly discussed in next chapter.

A confusion of sleep and death can be found in “Mont Blanc“ as well. Shelley states here that not only it is said that the soul visits the realms of death in sleep, but also that death is slumber. I believe that this philosophy has been put in the poem mainly to construct a certain mood. The poet might want to create a feeling of grandeur and eternity, and manages to construct the right mood through talking about fundamental philosophical issues. Angela

Leighton expresses the same ideas about “Mont Blanc.” She writes in *Shelley and the Sublime*, that Shelley when writing this poem, seems to seek some sort of deeper power or force beyond the mere dramatic landscape. She claims that he most likely is looking for a power to fantasize about rather than believe in (48). Leighton also draws attention to Shelley’s interest in Zoroastrian religion and claims that the deity spoken of rather is of this kind than a Christian (60). Leighton further states, that the forces of “Mont Blanc” can be a philosophical necessity that he speaks of, rather than an actual deity (62).

In “Adonais” the metaphor of sleep takes a more complicated form. The protagonist is experiencing death in the shape of sleep. In the third verse, Shelley describes how Adonais is mute and how death is deeply enjoying this, in an almost torturous way (23-27). Death is not thoroughly the bad form of existence though living is far worse. Living means pain, decay and grief, and the poet urges the reader to let Adonais stay sleeping, so that he will not have to suffer the ordeals of the living (61-63). It resembles the way he talked about Alastor’s nonexistence as a blessing. All this is rather unproblematic from an atheistic point of view, considering that, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, sleep as a euphemism for death does not contradict atheism.

Later on, the poem becomes harder to decipher. In line 338-340, Shelley states

Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow
 Back to the burning fountain whence it came
 A portion of the Eternal, which must glow (338-340)

According to Theodore Redpath, “Adonais” has been accused by contemporary critics of being confusing (50 and 166). Considering this and the poem’s artistic style and mythological theme, the events here are most likely meant to be aesthetic.

Another possibility is that it could be a notion about faith in a supernatural power, but if that is the case it would not be a Christian deity, considering the way the spirit goes back to its

origin instead of transcending into a new and higher plane of existence. If Hoagwood is right about Shelley not being atheistic in the sense of dismissing any supernatural powers, but more of an agnostic, the latter idea would not actually contradict his belief, even though it would make this more dubious (16-17).

Death is not only compared to sleep in “Adonais,” but also to being awake. I have decided to discuss dying as a form of awakening in this chapter as well, while it works the same way as death as a sleep. In both metaphors, despite their being opposites, one enters the various stages of consciousness through the medium of sleeping or waking, and has to distinguish the dream from the real world. “Peace, peace! He is not dead, he doth not sleep. He hath awakened from the dream of life,” the stranger claims in the 39th verse (343-344). What can be found in the stranger’s speech is a mythological idea. Adonais has awakened from this horrible place and cannot be hurt by all the horrible things in life, just as he could not be hurt by them when he was asleep. The existence which Adonais has transcended into seems to be an oneness with nature and the universal forces (361-387). These verses are a slightly contradictory combination of clichés and spiritual religion. One cannot help wondering whether Shelley really put any deeper thought behind these verses – or whether he wrote them as a purely artistic piece, which content is not supposed to be interpreted literally, but somehow resembles a mourner’s soothing, and slightly hysterical thoughts. Otherwise it seems rather contradictory that Adonais has left this world – while it is a place of dreaming – but still is part of it through inhabiting all of creation. Together with the contradictory statement about the protagonist being awake as well as asleep, it is easy to assume that most of this is symbolic.

The combination of the illogical trail of thoughts and the very clear mythological theme of the verse makes it quite possible to dismiss the religious views of these verses as pure art. Still one has to consider the possibility that Shelley had ideas about a spiritual state of going back to

the origin source of life, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Parallels to the idea of becoming one with nature can be found in poetry as early as the metaphysics. John Donne writes in "Sweetest love I do not goe" that: "When thou sigh'st, thou sigh'st not winde, But sigh'st my soule away" (25-26). This applies to the same thought; that the deceased is in the atmosphere surrounding the mourners, and still an ethereal part of their very existence.

By the concluding three lines Heaven, is mentioned in the poem as well. Shelley talks about Adonais' soul being among the eternal above with the stars. Considering the whole multitude of religious ideas this poem displays I think we can dismiss this as an artistic expression without any deeper philosophical meaning behind it.

Leighton suggests that the references to higher powers might be a style of art, possibly put into the poem to fit the pastoral style it is written in (134). She further argues that the made-one-with-nature-thought could be a metaphor for an aesthetical continuance (146). According to her the "eternal existence" means immortality as a poet (133) and the muteness of the grave the inability to create anything more after death (131).

The idea of death as an awakening from a troublesome existence can also be found in "Lift not the Painted Veil." Shelley writes here about the realm of life as an unreal plane with a blurry view of a more solid world, almost like Plato's theory of forms. He describes this life as filled with weird shadows cast from that new entangling world. The veil is tempting us with false promises of something brighter and better. Hope and fear lurk behind and the whole concept of a better world on the other side of the veil is a lie. On reaching it, one will not find the very thing he or she was searching for (224). This could actually be a metaphor for the lack of an afterlife in Shelley's faith. The promises of the veil could symbolize the promises the church and other religious institutions make about eternal bliss. That hope and fear lurking there might in that case point to the hopes and fears Christians hold for Heaven and Hell.

The whole idea about the veil carries a strong resemblance to a passage in The First Corinthians. "For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Shelley's poem could be a satirical reply to this, with the veil being the glass, but with the clearer world that Paul claims to wait on the other side only being a deception. In that case, this could be considered somewhat disguised criticism of the lies religions such as Christianity serves us.

Chapter 3: Death as a heavenly existence

The Biblical theme is also an important feature of “Queen Mab.” As mentioned before, this poem takes the form of a mythological journey, where the spirit of the human Ianthe is abducted by the fairy queen and shown the past, the present and the future of the human race.

The main theme of the poem is that the powers that rule mankind are destructive, selfish and evil; the earthly regents as well as the spiritual leaders. Ianthe gets to see and understand how small the earth is, and how the corrupted human race destroys it. By the end she is shown a paradise, a heaven-on-earth, what the world would be like if people started to care about the important things instead of being selfish and greedy.

Even though the primary meaning of the poem is clearly nonreligious, it displays many religious ideas as well. “Is there a God?” Ianthe asks, and Ahasuerus replies “Is there a God! Aye an almighty God! And vengeful as almighty!” (VII 83-85) The following pages mock Genesis and the gospels, retelling the Christian mythology with blood and terror. Shelley clearly states that God is created by humans and that religion is a part of the selfish nature of humankind. “Twin-sister of Religion, selfishness!” (V 22) he states, and he goes on to clarify that all religions are the same capitalistic evil (V 23-126). In Christianity as he sees it – men go to Hell, while Heaven is inhabited by slaves. One cannot be a free person and a devoted Christian at the same time. Shelley was only 20 years old when writing this poem, and had been expelled from Oxford the year before for writing the pamphlet “The Necessity of Atheism” (Leighton 27). It seems very likely that it is the very young and devoted atheist that wrote these verses, and these parts of the poems are not very surprising.

It is however surprising that he repeatedly talks about eternal souls. In the third song Mab says that “Worthy a soul that claims its kindred with eternity” (III 209-210) and in the sixth song “Oh! Rest thee tranquil: chase those fearful doubts, which never could rack an

everlasting soul" (VI 26-27). These lines, in combination with the ones mentioned in the second chapter, make the eternal soul an important part of the poem. As I concluded in that chapter, it is most likely a part of the mythological aspect of the poem. And while he rewrites the Christian lore, Genesis as well as the gospels I believe that he is playing with the other aspects of the religion he wants to mock.

The poem "Ode to Heaven" shows three different takes on the concept of "Heaven". The different views are portrayed through the speeches of three spirits. The first talks about Heaven as something eternal that sees generation after generation passing away. It implicates that Heaven is the one solid thing, almost a God by itself. "Their unremaining gods and they, like a river roll away: Thou remainest such alway" (25-27). It does not seem like this Heaven is meant as a paradise for deserving souls. It is rather a metaphor for the Universe, as it could have been seen in those days; unchangeable and impersonal. The opening of the poem "Palace-roof of cloudness nights!" (1) proves this further, as well as the lines "Glorious shapes have life in thee, Earth and all Earth's company" (10-11).

The second spirit is talking about the life beyond the grave as something extraordinary. Here the imagery from "Lift Not the Painted Veil" and the First Corinthian mentioned in the second chapter is used again. The spirit talks about "the minds first chamber, round which its young fancies clamber" (28-29). I assume this is a portrait of life, and how it is difficult for the human mind to focus on the vital things, when the whole world could be explored. Life is described as being in a badly lit cave, and the grave as a portal to something much brighter and clearer. This corresponds better to the First Corinthian than to "Lift Not the Painted Veil." Considering the similarity to the idea expressed in the biblical verse I think it is highly probable that Shelley was inspired by it when writing this poem as well. The reason for him to speak in the favor of the world on the other side of the glass or veil this time, is probably that

he is not speaking his own ideas in this part of the poem, but voicing ideas that are later contrasted by the ones of the last, and more atheistic, spirit.

The final spirit takes on a more naturalistic view. It asks what defines Heaven, or humanity, and finally compares Heaven to dew in the morning. Something that gleams and looks nice, but soon disappears without a trace (46-54). It is unclear what the ten millions that the poem speaks about in the lines

In that frail and fading sphere,
with ten millions gathered there,
to tremble gleam and disappear. (422)

Shelley could not possibly know even approximately how many people there actually were in 1819, so it could very well mean ten million people, and then the comparison with disappearing with the dew, would point to the short mortal lifespan.

This spirit is also talking about the abyss as something invented by the human mind. “Peace! The abyss is wreathed with scorn, at your presumption, Atomborn!”(37-38) it states. Humans are referred to as “atomborn” through the poem, an expression I believe is used to point out that people are purely made of physical material and dwelling in a mechanical universe.

Dr Woodcock says in the footnotes to the poem in the Wordsworth Poet Library edition that Shelley means to present three ways to see life (672), possibly as a part of a big plan, as a prelude to the glorious life in Heaven and as something short, but beautiful. I think this is somewhat correct, but also that the fact that he has put the more atheistic spirits first and last for the reason to emphasize this way of thinking as the true one. The spirit that believes that life is short and everything disappears like dew does get the final word.

Conclusion

In this essay, I analyze the way Shelley writes about physical death, or the decay of the dead body in his poetry. He seems to use gruesome and morbid details to create sadness or grotesque images. He also mixes the macabre with the serene to create a confusion in the reader.

The term sleep is used frequently, and in some places, as the first part of “Queen Mab,” it is hard to distinguish actual sleep from death. When talking about death as a sleep it is often in a symbolic way. This is slightly different from my original idea, about it holding a decorative function. As a symbol it is not contradicting a modern atheistic world view though. However, at some points the functions of sleeping and being awake have the opposite roles. In for example “Lift Not the Painted Veil” and some passages of “Adonais,” life is seen as the sleeping state, and death as the awake. The first of these poems is most likely a satirical response to the First Corinthians 13:12 though, while the latter is part of a contradictive stream of thoughts that cannot be taken seriously.

The biblical references can be found in “Queen Mab” as well, and I start the third chapter by discussing these. In this poem, Shelley discusses religion, politics and philosophy, and declares religion, especially Christianity as the root to much of what is wrong with society today. He talks about Heaven as the home of slaves, and Hell as the place where men go – most likely to show how totalitarian the Christian religion is. In the seventh part, he mocks the Bible through retelling Genesis and the gospels in the ways of a blood thirsty and vengeful God. However, neither of the passages mentioned from “Queen Mab” has anything to do with an actual belief in an afterlife. They can all be dismissed as critic against Christianity.

The final poem, “Ode to Heaven”, is written as a dialogue between three spirits. The first talks about Heaven as a metaphor for the Universe, while the second sees it as the same

glorious place behind the glass as is mentioned in the First Corinthian. The third spirit talks about it as something fictional, and about existence as something delightful but brief.

Through this essay I have shown that despite Shelley's frequent usage of afterlife references, there is really nothing in his poetry that contradicts his being an atheist in the modern sense of the word. In all the passages where an afterlife is mentioned, there are clear irreligious or contrareligious meanings behind it. Sometimes it is an aesthetical grasp, in other places a way to tell a mythological story, or a way to mock religion.

While Shelley himself is long since dead, it is not possible to say for sure which beliefs or doubts he might have held during his short life, but through analyzing and discussing the ways he deals with the subject of death in these six poems I am convinced that he stayed true to his atheistic beliefs in his poetry, and that there is nothing in his poetry that indicates that he believed in any continuous conscious existence beyond death.

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