

# Can Shelley help us save the world? An ecocritical exploration of the romantic movement.

The foundations upon which the romantic movement was built fundamentally and wholeheartedly oppose mankind's wanton destruction of the Earth. A central tenet of romantic poetry is a profound reverence for nature, and in none is this veneration and respect so clear as in the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. What elevates Shelley above his romantic peers is his dynamic and erratic style, his rejection of convention and his individuality of thought - his poems are not simple appraisals of natural beauty, they also burst with irrepressible vivacity and many are testaments to his rebellious and unapologetically forward thinking mind. A disdain for corruption, greed and self absorption, a distrust of powerful societal forces, a refusal to conform, and a near religious worship of nature are powerfully expressed in his poetry, and we truly should 'be listening now as he listened then.' as we attempt to reverse the effects of the climate crisis.

The ways in which Shelley interpreted the principles of the romantic movement were fascinating, and significantly more revolutionary than many of his contemporary peers. Of these central tenets, several relate almost prophetically to the current climate crisis - one such example being compassion for wildlife in all forms. Shelley converted to vegetarianism in 1813<sup>1</sup>, again demonstrating his progressive and non conformist tendencies, as meat was an essential component of almost all diets except in some South Asian countries at the time. In today's era of intensive farming, lines such as 'never again may blood of bird or beast/Stain with its venomous stream a human feast'<sup>2</sup> are particularly pertinent. His strong language - 'venom' and 'stain' suggest his intense disdain for the exploitation of nature, perhaps suggesting to consume animals is to leave a moral 'stain', as biblically a 'stain' relates to a sin (Then can you lift up your face to Him without **stain** of sin)<sup>3</sup>, as well as 'venomous' being quite antithetical to the idea of a 'feast'.

The romantic movement as a reaction to the enlightenment is also something to be considered. Born of Renaissance Humanism in the 17th century, the enlightenment and rationalism were the precursors to many of the scientific advancements that lead to rapid industrialisation, and to react so strongly against this as Shelley did in his poetry demonstrates an impressive prescience. Shelley poignantly describes mankind as 'old men and women disarrayed [...] seeking to reach the light that leaves them still.'<sup>4</sup>, in his poem '*The Triumph Of Life*'. To present them as 'old' as modern science was experiencing its infancy, and as searching for light in vain - perhaps a direct reference to the enlightenment - suggests his view of the scientific advancements as ultimately unfulfilling. This is furthered by his decision to have these strange men and women perpetually dancing - ' they wheel though ghastly shadows interpose', suggesting mankind continues wasting its time in futile and repetitive pursuits, heedless of 'ghastly shadows', or warnings of impending catastrophe, again particularly poignant when considering the decisions of world leaders to deny climate change despite evidence to the contrary.

Shelley paints such despotic leadership in a similarly negative light. In his poem 'Ozymandias'<sup>5</sup>, this is particularly the case. Its unusual structure is typical of his unconventional and bold style, representing three viewpoints within one sonnet, allowing him to contrast the ruler's bold assertions of timeless power with the ravages of time on his empire, drawing attention to the absurdity of his claims. Ozymandias' self ascription of the title 'King of Kings' is another potential biblical reference, and perhaps a warning from Shelley that nobody should view themselves indestructible or omnipotent as a God, and despite man's 'cold command' of Earth at present, eventually nothing but 'lone and level sands' will remain. Humility and the admission of fallibility are prerequisites to change for the better.

As a strong juxtaposition to these presentations of humans as foolish and vacuous, when Shelley personifies nature, she is altogether different. In 'The Triumph Of Life'<sup>6</sup>, as opposed to 'wheeling' with 'decaying limbs', nature's dance is on 'feet no less than the sweet tune'. Rather than dancing to seek an ever distant light, she dances to express herself, to feel free. As she dances, 'the moist earth laughs below', and the image is one of merriment and youth as opposed to the tonally jarring and disjointed movements of the crowd of people. Shelley revels in nature's boundless playfulness, far removed from mankind's cold use of resources as a means to an end.

He also presents the natural world as deeply connected with the human condition, leading naturally to the conclusion that to exploit and destroy it is only to condemn ourselves. He writes, 'I am the daughter of the Earth and water/ I am the nursling of the sky'<sup>7</sup>, giving natural forces a nurturing role with the maternally associated noun 'nursling'. In 'Love's Philosophy'<sup>8</sup>, the line 'All things by a law divine/In one spirit meet and mingle.' and the weaving of love and nature 'And the moonbeams kiss the sea/What is all this sweet work worth/If thou kiss not me?', suggest with great profundity that it is in our interest to preserve and delight in nature, as it is inextricably linked to the fabric of our being and the most unfathomable and joyous of our emotions. He allows us to experience its transcendent beauty, showing rather than telling of its inherent worth.

In conclusion, while Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge all express beautifully the awe inspiring power of nature, none other than Shelley so seamlessly combine magnificent imagery with vaulting philosophies and uncompromising political statements. Many of the challenges of the 21st century contributing to climate change - greed, corruption and mass consumerism, can be countered with Shelley's messages of compassion and individualism. And, perhaps above these more material considerations, as we begin to make changes to our lifestyles we should continue to read his wondrous exaltations of nature, to remind ourselves of just what it is we are saving.

## SOURCES

1. Percy Shelley, *A Vindication Of The Natural Diet*, 1813
2. Percy Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam, Canto 5*, 1818
3. King James Bible, Job 11:15
4. Percy Shelley, *The Triumph Of Life*, 1824
5. Percy Shelley, *Ozymandias*, 1817
6. Percy Shelley, *The Triumph Of Life*, 1824
7. Percy Shelley, *The Cloud*, 1820
8. Percy Shelley, *Love's Philosophy*, 1819