

# Longing and Loss

## Shelley's Imaginative Expansiveness in *Adonais* and the Bridge to Eternity

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### Abstract

Many Romantic poets of the 18th century explored the human fascination with death, and they sought to understand it through poetry. This article analyzes Percy Bysshe Shelley's elegiac poem *Adonais* as an example of a tangible touchstone, or as a manifestation of ourselves that we leave behind after death. This poem conveys Shelley's grief over Keats' early passing, and underlines the idea that the physical impermanence of life can be transcended by poetry.

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"We all die. The goal isn't to live forever, the goal is to create something that will."

- Palahniuk, Chuck

The gift of life is one of the most miraculous, yet mysterious, one can ever be bestowed. Romantic poets were well aware of this truth and they longed to overcome the limitations of ordinary human experience and gain a profound comprehension beyond human reality. Life is an endless supplier of diverse experiences and it is through enduring and overcoming these countless experiences that we are able to define the meaning of our lives and understand its profound significance. The Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, through his elegiac work *Adonais*, struggles through the journey from darkness to light after the death of the highly influential Romantic poet, John Keats. We find ourselves in a parallel journey when we are faced with enduring a great loss. Poetry holds many keys to the comprehension of death, loss, and love and poetry offers solace for the loss of a loved one through conveying that death is not the enemy: death is the peaceful existence from the evils of men. Shelley shared a faith with Keats "in the ability of the imagination to transform experience, particularly in Nature, and a belief in the primacy of poetry" (Knerr 1). Shelley's relationship with Keats was a professional one, more so than a personal one,

however, Shelley's parallel identity with Keats, as a young poet, inspired and motivated him to write *Adonais*. Shelley felt that far more died than just a person. According to Jean Hall, as asserted in Harold Bloom's collection of modern critical views, "if the dead have sung well in life, the living will take up their song and continue it", illustrating the notion of a greater existence beyond the physical: the existence of eternity. Shelley's literary endeavor, in *Adonais*, is to provide consolation for the sorrowful, including himself.

In our mortal lives we possess individual talents and it is our moral obligation to present these talents to the world. By offering these talents we establish a greater connection with the universe and leave our proper eminent marks. It is these manifestations of our selves that survive our deaths and Shelley discovered this truth through his expression of his emotions in his elegiac poem, *Adonais*. Although Shelley mourned the passing of John Keats, whose relationship, according to Anthony D. Knerr, was primarily a literary rather than a personal one, he praised Keats' work of poetic brilliance as a portion of the infinite: "Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be/An echo and a light unto eternity!" (Lines 8-9). Shelley, as a Romantic poet, writes as a coping mechanism and method of self-reflection during his process of grieving, part of this grief stemming from his sense of loss of the Romantic era:

Shelley used the occasion of Keats' death to vent his feelings of persecution and frustration. He transmuted these intensely personal considerations into an elegy which is concerned with the fate of the poet in society and the ways in which the eternal forms of beauty and truth are reflected in the phenomenal world. (Knerr 6)

Through his poetic composition the reader is able to identify with and understand that death is a part of life, the memories of the person lost forever live within us, and the memories of what we have lost are manifested in the touchstones they have left behind. All things in life are ever changing, ever evolving, however, our memories are permanent and recalling these memory touchstones is therapeutic and provides consolation. In times of sorrow and grief, the eternal quality of "poetry creates a false eternity or paradise which we cling to for agonizing comfort as long as we possibly can" in desperation for solace (Bloom 147). Our memories serve, in our lives, as an escape from present adversities and they bring with them emotions of peace, consolation, and pleasantness. Poetry is used as an expression of these profoundly significant memories and experiences. Poetry provides hopefulness to the grieving in

conveying, through eloquently scripted lines, that although the physical being has been lost the spiritual being becomes a part of the eternal. The light of joy tends to dim as we age and endure further hardships, but the spontaneous recollection of memories brings us peace and joy - these recollections bring moments of epiphany. To understand the complexity of life one must also understand, and appreciate, its physical impermanence yet despite this physical temporality we must understand that not all of ourselves must endure this process of evanescence. It is through the tangible manifestations of our selves that we transcend the physical life. As declared by Shelley himself, poetry makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world, therefore the beauty of the spirit of the lost loved one exists in a state of immortality through our memory touchstones. Shelley imbeds Keats' existence through his elegiac work *Adonais*.

Romantic poets longed to overcome the limitations of ordinary experience, they sought to gain a profound comprehension beyond human reality. Romantic poets embarked on the journey of imaginative expansiveness and self-realization. In *Biographia Literaria*, the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another Romantic poet, he articulates the power and essence of poetry, he articulates the concept of truth and asserts the importance of the power of mastery and the necessity of the internalization of great works of literature to help us understand ourselves, reality, and humankind. Coleridge elaborates on how and why this is important. Coleridge argues that, "...not the poem which we have read, but that to which we return, with the greatest pleasure, possesses the genuine power, and claims the name of essential poetry" (Coleridge 675). Coleridge is enlightening his audience to the notion of power and mastery over an art, the idea that it is not merely the works we encounter but rather the works we return to and emphasize that deserve our attention and dedication. In the excerpt from Chapter Four of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge argues that the mark of excellence in Romantic poetry is "to represent familiar objects so as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them" (Coleridge 675). According to Romantic poets, the mark of excellency of an individual includes excellence in the utilization of the imagination and Shelley maintained undeniable strength in his thoughts and his writing. Coleridge contends that "...the primary *imagination* I hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human perception" (Coleridge 676). According to the Romantic poets, the imagination is fundamental to achieving agency over subjects, literary works in this specific context, the creation and comprehension of such works, and the agency over the self, as fitting into one's proper place in the world and

bestowing upon society the imaginative gifts one possesses that will transcend the mortal life and exist in a state of immortality; for what we leave behind is never truly lost. Poetry is the superior manifestation of imagination that transcends the mortal life and transcends human limitations, for to surrender intellectually and imaginatively is far worse than death:

...poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divine in man -  
 turning all things, even death to loveliness, and thereby making familiar  
 objects be, in a way, not familiar, yet in another way, piercingly familiar.  
 (Kurtz xiii)

In his poem, Shelley adheres to the "laws" of poetry and assumes the role of excellency in conveying common experiences of humankind. Shelley conveys experiences of hope and sorrow, of dejection and defeat, of despair and of victory, of social interests that were, and still are, universal in the human experience. The Romantic poet presents reality in common language to allow access and agency over the power of literature to "ordinary" people, not just the bourgeoisie of society; "The Poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity," awakening elements of the self that had previously existed unacknowledged and further iterating the basic fundamentality and essentialness of literature (Coleridge 681). Shelley, the poet, conveys the experience that all living beings have in common: death.

The inescapable and resounding mantra reminding us that all good things must come to an end haunts our deepest nightmares. While we accept the inevitability of death, we do not understand it. Death exists as an incident in the progress of life, death illuminates the "infinite meaning of life", death is "the great revealer of infinity and eternity" (Kurtz 70). The Romantic poets had many opinions on the concept of death and they often expressed themselves "with a fervour and a strangeness that made their utterances seem prophetic" (Kurtz x). Shelley conveyed his emotional distress at the loss of a great young poet in his elegiac work *Adonais*. John Keats died on February 23, 1821 in Rome, Italy at the young age of twenty-five. Shelley admired Keats' talent and he understood his potential as a literary genius, therefore, the loss of this poet was a loss not only for Shelley but for the era of Romanticism and the literary world as a whole. In his Preface, Shelley states to his readers:

The genius of the lamented person to whose memory I have dedicated these unworthy verses, was not less delicate and fragile than it was

beautiful; and where canker-worms abound, what wonder, if it's young flower was blighted in the bud? (Shelley 4)

Shelley understood that life had robbed himself, Keats, and the literary world of Keats' fullest potential, however, he also understood that the work Keats had left behind would exist forever as his legacy, a tangible legacy that death could not touch, that death could not erase. Shelley was interested in and invested himself in Keats, and while during Keats' life the effort had not been reciprocated, he continued to posthumously regard him highly and attempted to pay a flawless tribute. Shelley stated himself that, "The *Adonais* in spite of its mysticism, is the least imperfect of my compositions" (Shelley 16). Shelley's persistency in conveying his emotions is reflective of his love and sympathy for humanity and his effort to "point out that it is love and beauty which draw us on to our deepest possible awareness of life" (Kurtz 177). Shelley believed that love can defeat the ugliness of death and that "death, extinction, immortality, love, and mutability are woven into a beautiful and tragic whole, with love dominating fear and hope" (Kurtz 120). Shelley was a revolutionary idealist who sought to spread love throughout society and who advocated an imaginative revolution because for Shelley, "to be governed by imagination is to be always a revolutionary" (Purinton 100). Through his work, Shelley sought to awaken people to reexamine the fictions that were disguised under masks that acted as truths and reanalyze what is happening within us, what we are feeling, what we are experiencing, what makes us who we are. Shelley sought for people to realize and reflect upon the truths happening inside of their heads, not just the "truths" that were forced down their throats through ideological institutions. Shelley challenges his readers to be pensive and reflective of the experiences and emotions they endure and comprehend how this affects them and how this further defines who they are, what their purpose is, what life means to them, and how death factors into their understanding of themselves and their understanding of the physical world the dead leave behind.

Death is a concept many of us find difficult to grapple with. Every experience in life exists within a realm of "temporal experience" (Reiman 13). It is the loss of this temporal experience that we find ourselves not understanding. Western society has found difficulty in confronting how or why such events occur, something as natural and common as death, and through contemplation on the loss of a loved one we seek consolation and comfort in many art forms. We seek answers from others' perspective when we find ourselves unable to adequately express what it is that we feel. Artists provide to us the tangible representation

of ourselves that we seek to convey in our time of need. In times of distress we not only long for comfort, but we long for an escape from the cruelties of reality. "Poetry is an ornate creation of surfaces - a verbal cosmetic designed to conceal horror" which offers the imagined escape we find ourselves desperately seeking (Bloom 147). Although we understand the reality of the situation we look to poetry to provide comfort and solace through the realization that we are not alone in our emotions. Poetry also provides beauty and eloquence in times these virtues seem vanished from existence. During times of loss and confusion we seek answers and although artists cannot give us direct justifications they offer insights, on the concept of death, beyond our own imaginative abilities. Shelley attempts to convey to his readers that death is misunderstood, while it "has always been the central symbol of the cruelty and darkness of life" through his poetry it is "softened", it is "shrouded in beauty" (Kurtz 179). Shelley conveys to his reader an unconventional understanding of death. Shelley attempts to enlighten us of the notion that death is a promised escape from the imperfections of life and it is the freedom from suffering, "Awake him not! surely he takes his fill/Of deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all ill" (62-63). Shelley implies that despite the tragedy the living is left with, the dead have found the stage of ultimate and peaceful happiness, a place we all subliminally hope to belong to someday. There is uncertainty in every aspect of life and often times it is not meant to be completely understood but rather appreciated for its beauty. Keats asserted, in a letter to his brothers, that negative capability is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Mysteries, for Romantic poets, were intriguing adventures: "it was profoundly characteristic of the romanticists to love mysteries, and for them death was the greatest of mysteries" (Kurtz xi). As J.M. Barrie writes through the voice of his fictional character Peter Pan, "To die would be an awfully big adventure." Shelley contemplated Keats' claim, in the letters written to his brothers, in developing his own reflections on the unexplainable concept of death. It is through these contemplations that we further understand ourselves and the process of life and death.

In times of grief we find ourselves with many unanswered questions. The process of grief comprises of a series of steps we subconsciously embark on. Initially we find ourselves in a state of shock; this shock then develops into confusion, and the confusion evolves into sorrow. Oftentimes, we then find ourselves in a juxtaposition of sadness and anger, which consequently morphs into denial. It is the final and most peaceful process of grief when we achieve a state of acceptance and a realization that we must continue to live and fulfill our

own destinies. Shelley's elegiac poem, *Adonais*, conveys the experience of these same transformational sections (Bloom 145). Shortly after the poet proclaims that Adonais has reached a level of greater existence he expresses the constraints of his sadness: "Ah woe is me! Winter is come and gone, / But grief returns with the revolving year;" as if trapped in a paralysis of sorrow, fear, and despair (Lines 154-155). Despite our attempts of finding consolation, it is a human tendency to return to the nostalgic. Throughout the poem there is a prevalent reflection of what was lost and it presents two contrary states of the human soul, the part that longs to return to more tranquil times and the part that laments and appreciates life experiences, such as the loss of a loved one, for molding the individual one has become. Through poetry we attempt on "trying to solving the problem of the mystery of death" through any means necessary (Mahajana). The poet endures this same hardship, in his coming to terms with the reality that John Keats is dead:

Oh gentle child, beautiful as thou wert,  
 Why didst thou leave the trodden paths of men  
 Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart  
 Dare unpastured dragon in his den? (235-238)

Shelley questions the events, as many of us find ourselves doing in times of great loss. Poetry expresses raw emotions that people experience in their daily lives and Shelley embarked on a literary project that conveyed realistic experiences, which were relatable to the common man. His poem focuses on the conveyance of the emotions to give meaning to the situation and not vice versa. The poet seeks solace and justification through the composition of his poem and in doing so he simultaneously offers this to his readers. In his *Defense of Poetry*, Shelley asserts, "Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things" in an attempt to justify his ways to his readers (847). Poetry is an eternal art form that gives us solace in great times of need; it provides a realm of fantasy from the endless continuum of pain that consumes us when we lose something so dear. Despite the tragic events depicted in the poem, the poet creates a brief moment of ecstasy through his eloquent and well-written words.

When we lose something of utter importance to us we feel like an empty shell, robbed of all substance. It is our human flaw to believe that life will never

contain happiness again. In times of grief we find it difficult to look beyond the obstacle and we merely indulge in our sadness, but great artists attempt to counter this tendency by offering us an altered and insightful way of considering the situation. Shelley declares, in *Adonais*:

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.... (343-346)

The poet, who has embarked on the experience of imaginative expansiveness, is implying to us that we must not weep for *Adonais* any longer, we must rejoice that he has entered the realm of the transcendental (Bloom 152): "For he is gone, where all things wise and fair/Descend;" (Lines 24-25). In times of grief we need consolation that what we are suffering is not an impossible feat presented in our lives. Although no action can restore what once was, poetry can give us solace that our love for the individual will survive their death and exist, eternally, within us. Shelley's *Adonais* is a poem of immortality in which Shelley laments on the loss of Keats and consequentially realizes that Keats' poetry will endure the test of time (Bloom 151). Through contemplation of the event Shelley realizes that he has been made "one with Nature" and has become part of the universe (Line 370). Through the poetic composition we come to a consolatory knowledge of ultimate reality, that our physical bodies may vanish from the earth, but the gifts we have bestowed upon it within our lifetime shall not perish. The natural beauty of life deserves admiration and although no human words could ever do it justice, poetry "thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world" (*A Defense of Poetry* 847). Shelley, along with the other Romantic poets, offers consolation and solace through his poetic endeavors to reassure us that life does not exist in vain but rather bestows infinitive gifts upon the world.

Shelley discovers that despite the unfavorable and unforeseen circumstance of the death of the young John Keats, he must continue his own journey of self-realization. Through loss we begin to reflect on our own mortality and realize that despite all of life's trials and tribulations we must continue to live and fulfill our purposes. Death provides an opportunity to accept our own mortality and it is through poetry that we are brought comfort in the realization that we are not alone in our suffering. It does not serve life justice to exist in a state of stillness when the ones we have lost have moved onto a greater idealized existence.



Shelley communicates this notion of continuing to fulfill our destinies to his audience:

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! (Lines 469-471)

Despite our inability to see and accept it, the universal truth of life is that all things must return to their proper, and progressive, order. Through poetry we are able to contemplate the beauty of our impermanent lives: "*Adonais* is a high song of poetic self-recognition in the presence of foreshadowing death, and also a description of poetic existence, even of a poem's state of being" (Bloom 23). When we lose a part of ourselves we realize the value and fragility of life. We begin to further understand that we too must one day endure the final phase of life, death, but through love expressed during one's lifetime the spirit of our being may live on forever. Shelley invites and "almost dares the reader, if he is still mourning, to join him in his newfound vision of Immortality" (Percy Shelley: Poems Summary and Analysis). Through the composition of *Adonais* Shelley was offered a forecast of his own future, the inevitability of his own death (Bloom 145). As argued by Milton, in his epic *Paradise Lost*, the destructive power of the imagination can make a hell out of heaven, a heaven out of hell and we must not live suppressed by our fears but venture out into the world because time cannot erase our accomplishments. Death brings unification to what life once divided – "No more let Life divide what Death can join together" (477) – and it is through death that "man can submerge himself again in nature, and become part of the universe" (Mahajna). Life is not meant to be wholly understood, for it is immeasurable, but its beauty is captivating and life is to be appreciated and productive, for our marks will outlive us.

The products that we create throughout our lifetime, outlive our physical life. What we establish while we live, transcends our mortal selves and exists in a realm of eternity. While Shelley embraces death, in his poem *Adonais*, as a transition into eternity there seems to also exist a preoccupation of Shelley's own life evident in the last lines of the poem; it can also be suggested that the last part of the poem is more a personal reflection of Shelley than it is about John Keats. Shelley was concerned with the end of Keats' life, but he was also concerned with the end of his:

I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;

Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,  
The soul of Adonais, like a star,  
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. (492-495)

Shelley desires to reach the realm of eternity and to achieve the immortality that John Keats has succeeded in attaining through his art. Shelley refers to death as the “immortalizing winter,” he constructs an idea of death as both “destroyer and preserver” (Kurtz 247). It is the finality of death that humankind is concerned with – the sadness, the decay, the destruction that we ponder on – however, Shelley conveys to his readers that there is beauty to be found in the eternal Paradise that the living have not reached. Shelley is concerned with common questions of humanity, how our legacies will outlive us, how our names will be imbedded on the earth, and how our existences will remain alive beyond our physical lives. While our physical bodies leave the realm of the mortal, our spiritual beings escape the shackles of mortality and infinitely survive all physical limits and boundaries. Shelley exemplifies to his audience how Keats has transcended the mortal realm, through his work, but his preoccupations with his own self are reflective of the concerns of how he, and how we, will leave our footprints on terrestrial soil. Because of Shelley’s poetic expression, Keats lives on in the spiritual beauty of the lines of *Adonais*. Kurtz argues that “the testament of beauty in his works, wherein he added spirit to the physical sense of beauty, he has become forever a visible portion of the divinely revealing loveliness of life” (285). The immortality that Keats is able to achieve is of the spirit, not of his physical being. The human mind, conveyed through his works, persists after the death of the physical body. The eternal spiritual reality exists in the words Keats wrote in his life, the messages he gave to the world until his last breath, and Shelley reawakens these notions in his elegiac poem *Adonais*. The journey of immortality is completed when the artist participates in the infinite art of poetry. Death is the ultimate reminder of the “forever untold treasury of life” (Kurtz 305). The power of poetry is unfailing: the power to awaken, the power to inspire great change, the power to believe in something bigger than oneself, the power to communicate emotions, the power to understand the depths of the human soul.

Before my encounter with literature from the Romantic period I had not truly given thought to the effects of the losses I have endured throughout my life, as is the style of a Romantic writer, but now I am able to appreciate the beauty of my past and through my imagination I am able to return to it and experience its joy once more. Romantic works recollect the beauty of memories of lost times

and in these moments of recollection we, as readers, do not suffer from pain or sadness but rather we rejoice in the beauty and eloquence of the words utilized to convey a message to us about the lamentation of loss. It is not that the Romantic writer does not write with sadness felt deep in his heart for want of returning to a more joyous and blissful time in life, but rather it is the way in which the work is presented us that beautifies the experience. And as said by a highly intellectual and inspiring professor of mine, "great art is never depressing" (Salwak). The year 2011 of my personal life was one in which death was a dominant and recurring theme. Through all of my losses I have sought to ease my soul through poetry, for "poetry is a powerful therapeutic tool to deal with feelings, to empower us to walk through our own doors" (Glenis Redmond). Death reminds us that all created things are impermanent and we must strive on through our lives with awareness. Shelley delivered this notion through his work *Adonais* in attempt to make his readers aware of their own mortality and to appreciate life to its fullest potential. Art forms allow us to encompass a fragment of ourselves into the immortal. Just as doves remind me of my cousin Angel and motorcycles remind me of my Uncle Ray so does Romantic poetry recollect our memories of the great influential poets of the latter 18th century, along with the nostalgic emotions invoked in the poet that are expressed in the poems. The part of ourselves that so prominently influenced our living world survives our deaths through the hearts of the ones we once loved, in which this love was requited, and through the personal artifacts we leave behind. Many great thinkers believed that death was the complement of life, unexplainable but anticipative, nonetheless, and the consolation of living accordingly in the present would bring ultimate peace and happiness in this next stage. And although nothing can prohibit each of us from reaching the final stage of life, Shelley has demonstrated to us how we can outlive our physical bodies, how we can cross the bridge to Eternity.