



## The Master of All Things: The Human Soul in Shelley's Poems

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### Abstract

This article, combined with Shelley's individual life experience and the historical and cultural parts of the soul from the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, expounds Shelley's idea about the immortality of human soul from the perspective of individual soul. Shelley believes that the human soul is created by God and a perfect man should be a combination of the body and wisdom. Love is the only access to the eternal state of the human soul and the human soul, as the shadow of the soul of the universe, has the characteristic of the immortality after the death of the human body.

**Key words:** Shelley; Human soul

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### INTRODUCTION

The soul is like water, and everything existing in the universe is like a little drop of water. Butter says: "He was particularly interested in water because of the cycle-water vapour sucked up from the sea, cloud, rain, river, return to sea-which exemplifies unity in diversity; but I am not clear that he ever consciously used water as a symbol of matter" (Butter, 1954, p.101). The entire universe is a vast

expanse of water or ocean. The human soul is also just like water. Influenced by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, from the perspective of individual soul Shelley's idea about the immortality of human soul can be expounded by the nobility of the human soul and the immortality of the human soul. Shelley believes that the human soul is one part of God and a man should be a combination of the body and wisdom. Love is very essential in the human soul and Shelly holds the view that the human soul as the shadow of the soul of the universe is immortal.

### 1. THE NOBILITY OF THE HUMAN SOUL

In the long history of human evolution, human beings by developing the ability to walk have evolved much faster than animals in terms of the body, and absorb the foreign protein from food through the use of fire so as to promote the evolution of the brain. Languages are not the patent of human evolution, and animals also have their languages, but an animal cannot inherit the language and transfer the animal experience through its language. Only human beings can use language and books to hand down human experience from generation to generation, and therefore, human civilization has evolved and inherited from their processors. In the history of human evolution, man himself is divided into two parts: body and soul (spirit), which perhaps is the beginning of humans entering and creating great brilliant civilization. Maybe for the human being, the true meaning of the soul is that it is not the ultimate existence, but its inspiration to the human spirit. Because of the understanding of mankind soul being different from other animals, the ancient Greeks created the nature of God and many myths about god. In mythologies, the common part of man and God is that both of them have a soul. The concept of the soul is always throughout Greek mythology. The soul is the core of culture in ancient Greece, and a perfect man should be a combination of body and soul. Prometheus once said the

nobility of the soul as follows:

The soul of man can never be enslaved  
Save by its own infirmities, nor freed  
Save by its very strength and own resolve  
And constant vision and supreme endeavor!  
You will be free? Then, courage, O my brother!  
O let the soul stand in the open door  
Of life and death and knowledge and desire  
And see the peaks of thought kindle with sunrise!  
Then shall the soul return to rest no more,  
Nor harvest dreams in the dark field of sleep—  
Rather the soul shall go with great resolve  
To dwell at last upon the shining mountains  
In liberal converse with the eternal stars.

(Gayley, 2005, p.28)

Greatly influenced by Greek culture, Shelley's idea of human soul is also similar to what Prometheus once said about the nobility of the human soul:

But I was discontented with such a view of things as it afforded; man is a being of high aspirations, "looking both before and after," whose "thoughts wander through eternity," disclaiming alliance with transience and decay; incapable of imagining to himself annihilation; existing but in the future and the past; being, not what he is, but what he has been and shall be. Whatever may be his true and final destination, there is a spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution. This is the character of all life and being. Each is at once the centre and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred and the line in which all things are contained. Such contemplations as these, materialism and the popular philosophy of mind and matter alike forbid (Shelley, 1965, VI, p.194).

Since the birth of human beings, they have been full of fear, mystery and contradiction in the world where they struggle to survive, and they are often not satisfied with the material status of their own, resulting in the conception of the ideal human life state. Man is the master of all things, and is the result of the universal evolution and combination from biological or non biological, and then to the human, the continuing evolution of the universe structure has occurred. There is no doubt that man is a kind of spiritual life, and he can not live a long time without a spirit of faith, he needs to be the life of the soul as he needs for material life. The quest for the metaphysical and basic necessities of life constitutes the fundamental level of the living state of human beings.

The human soul has become the master of the universe, and each being in the universe can be found its corresponding part in the human body such as heads, faces, eyes and tears which are circular images. The circular pattern, the soul as the center is regarded as the measure of all things, is not only the symbol of ancient Greece, but also a symbol of the eternal harmony. The soul of man is round. Plato believed that the soul of a man belongs to the world soul, so the world soul is round. Aristotle's three concepts of the soul are based on the correspondence with the universe. In the universe, plants have the function of growth, and animals have the sensory

functions. A man has not only the growth and sensory functions, but also has the rational functions. Therefore, the soul of a man has these three properties. Shelley talked about the issue of the human soul in a letter to Elizabeth Hitchner:

When we speak of the soul of man, We mean that unknown cause which produces the observable effect evinced by his intelligence & bodily animation which are in their nature conjoined, and as we suppose, as we observe, inseparable. The word God then, in the sense which you take it analogises with the universe, as the soul of man to his body, as the vegetative power to vegetables, the stony power to stones. Yet were each of these adjuncts taken away what would be the remainder- What is man without his soul? He is not man (Shelley, 1964, I, pp.100-101).

The human soul that Shelley talked about is created by the creator God, and is also the combination of wisdom and body. Consequently, there is a difference between humans and others. The man with wisdom is the master of all things in the universe. Man is like the incarnation of God, who comes from and lives in everything. Therefore the soul of the universe from the distant in time and space structure, has an ancient echo. Shelley admits the existence of God, just as it is another way of saying that the physical existence of power. In Shelley's eyes, God is the soul of the universe: "Oh! that this Deity were the Soul of, the Universe, the spirit of universal imperishable love.-Indeed I believe it" (Shelley, 1964, I, p.45). Only in the condition of the soul of the universe, can the structure and movement of all things be scientifically explained in accordance with the occurrence and development of the law of human nature. Shelley's scientific explanation on the soul after death is as follows:

Have we existed before birth? It is difficult to conceive the possibility of this. There is, in the generative principle of each animal and plant, a power which converts the substances by which it is surrounded into a substance homogeneous with itself. That is the relations between certain elementary particles of matter undergo change and submit to new combinations (Shelley, 1965, VI, p.208).

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## 2. THE IMMORTALITY OF THE HUMAN SOUL

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Shelley believes that organic matters can break down into other substances and can be converted between substances. Since the matter is indestructible, then the soul is eternal. William Wordsworth, one of Shelley's predecessors, once pointed out that "The Child is father of the Man" in *My Heat Leaps Up*. Such similar sayings also appear in Milton's *Paradise Regained*. Compared with adults, children, especially in the initial state before the age of three, are much closer to the pure soul. However, with much knowledge and experience and under pressure, it is increasingly difficult for the soul of old men to survive, and with aging, the soul tends to

return to the initial state of children. Man is the master of all things, and in different growth stages the soul of man is sometimes close to nature and the universe, while it is far away from nature and the universe. The child's soul is a state close to the soul of the universe. Shelley says:

There are some persons who, in this respect, are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie, feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede, or accompany, or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. As men grow up this power commonly decays and they become mechanical and habitual agents (Shelley, 1965, VI, pp.195-196).

Children, pure in nature, are much closer to the state of the soul existing before birth that Wordsworth once pointed out in *Immortal*. He thinks that there exists the soul before man's birth. When the child grows up, he is far away from the state of the soul. Shelley's early poetry is undoubtedly influenced by Wordsworth, and naturally in terms of soul Shelley also deliberately imitated Wordsworth. In his childhood Wordsworth was connected to the soul. Similarly Shelley recalled his exploration of the human soul during his childhood in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*:

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,  
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.

(Shelley, 1905, P.531)

Shelley has explored the man's soul throughout his life, but sometimes in his early days he doubted the existence of the soul and in his late days he believed in it, which is a process of his understanding of the soul. After all, he died at the age of 29. Deeply affected by Wordsworth, Shelley thinks that man after death will eventually be in harmony with the nature, and the soul can be sublimated. Therefore, death is the only route one must take to return to nature and return to the soul of the universe. It is worth noting that although Shelley has a generous return to nature and the universal view of life and death, it may not be free for him from vulgarity. In his attitude towards death, he is also like others and often feels sad and even fear. The human body as a part of the material world is destined to die, but Shelley believes that the soul after death will still exist, so he says:

O man! Hold thee on in courage of soul  
Though the stormy shades of thy worldly way,  
And the billows of cloud that around thee roll  
Shall sleep in the light of a wondrous day,  
Where Hell and Heaven shall leave thee free  
To the universe of destiny

(Shelley, 1905, p. 524)

The immortality of the human soul is expressed in *To William Shelley*: My lost William, thou in whom/ Some bright spirit lived, and did /That decaying robe consume

(Shelley, 1905, p.581). The human soul is limited to the body, so the soul leaves the body, which is similar to the fact that the butterfly says goodbye to its cocoon. It is not to die but to be reborn. Shelley was deeply influenced by Plato: "Plato-with the possible exception of the Bible-was his favourite reading" (Butter, 1954, p.95). Shelley believes in Plato's immortality of the human soul and explores the true meaning of life with a detached attitude towards death. Shelley believes William's death is just physical, but his soul is:

With its life intense and mild,  
The love of living leaves and weeds  
Among these tombs and ruins wild  
Let me think that through low seeds  
Of sweet flowers and sunny grass  
Into their hues and scents may pass  
A portion—

(Shelley, 1905, p.581)

Obviously Shelley's view of the immortality of the soul is that life may change. Shelley expresses a deep attachment to his beloved son, and believes that William had a soul, and expected that his soul could be buried with his body, breeding wild plants and diffusing in nature and with the help of plants' color and aroma, and the soul could be full of eternal life with nature. This poem expresses Shelley's idea on the human soul after death, and also shows Shelley's concept of the soul. In *Fragment: Wedded Souls*, he says that he is a worldly spirit, living in the depths of the soul: I Am as a spirit who has dwelt/ Within his heart of hearts, and I have felt (Shelley, 1905, p.585). During Shelley's search of the soul, combined with his own life experience, Shelley's early poetry reflects his fatalism. In *To---*, Shelley compares the soul to the ghost or the shadow, which people can follow shadow: Thine own soul still is true to thee, / But changed to a foul fiend through misery. / This fiend, whose ghastly presence ever / Beside thee like thy shadow hangs (Shelley, 1905, p.526). Finally, Shelley had to warn people of the world: Be as thou art. Thy settled fate, / Dark as it is, all change would aggravate (Shelley, 1905, p.526).

Shelley's exploration of the human soul is also reflected in the perfection of the human soul, which is like each organ of the human body such as eyes filled with round face images. The human soul is asexual and has the nature of androgyny. *Epipsychidion* is the best embodiment of Shelley's pursuit of perfection of the human soul. This poem, a love lyric with 604 lines, is written for Emilia Viviani, whom Shelley met while she was imprisoned by her family in a convent near Pisa, Italy, in 1820. The poem's title is Greek which means "concerning a little soul." *Epipsychidion* opens with an invocation to Emilia as a spiritual sister of the speaker: "Sweet Spirit! Sister of that orphan one". He addresses her as a "captive bird," for whose nest his poem will be soft rose petals. He calls her an angel of light: Of light, and love, and immortality! And Shelley shows his deep

feeling to her: I never thought before my death to see / Youth's vision thus made perfect. Emily, /I love thee; though the world by no thin name. *Epipsychidion* is the poem that feminine Shelley creates his own soul searching for their lack of masculinity. Another part of the soul is a part of Shelley himself. On the one hand, Emily with imagination turned to get rid of physical appearance, and gender indeterminate becomes covered with bright fairy veil, while giving her the image of a perfect human soul. *Epipsychidion* is Shelley's practice on the human soul which is reaching a perfect like Utopia: "Just as our mortal natures are liable to hamper the purity of the best self, so human beauty is only a rough expression of the exquisite soul, and poetry an attempt to embody in words the deep truth of the imagination. So Shelley addresses Emily as follows: I pray thee that thou bolt from this sad song /All of its much mortality and wrong, /With those clear drops, which start like sacred dew /From the twin lights thy sweet soul darkens through, /Weeping, till sorrow becomes ecstasy: /Then smile on it, so that it may not die" (Watson & Haywood, 1992, p.330).

In the essay *On a Future State*, Shelley explains the whereabouts of the soul after death in a scientific attitude:

Have we existed before birth? It is difficult to conceive the possibility of this. There is, in the generative principle of each animal and plant, a power which converts the substances by which it is surrounded into a substance homogeneous with itself. That is the relations between certain elementary particles of matter undergo a change and submit to new combinations. (Shelley, 1965, VII, p.208).

In *Lines Written on Hearing the News of the Death of Napoleon*, Shelley shows a keen interest in the soul of such a prominent figure after death: Are not the limbs still when the ghost is fled, /And canst thou move, Napoleon being dead? /Thou wert warming thy fingers old O'er the embers covered and cold / Of that most fiery spirit, when it fled-- (Shelley, 1905, p.641). Shelley, covered with the veil of "atheist", knows very well of the Bible and actually holds a belief in the existence of God. Concerning death, Christians think people are composed of three parts which are spirit, soul and body and do not believe that death is the end of everything, and Death is just the soul leaving the body. In *Death*, Shelley believes that everything is mortal and so the idea of death is vanity. Everything will be deathly destroyed, but love will never die. Love is the power of the soul after death. Common people think that death is the greatest pain, but Shelley thinks that only by knowing what the essence of life and death is, can humans stand in the death of the endless pain. Christians have a higher spiritual pursuit, and that is eternal life. In this respect, there are many misunderstandings about Shelley, but King-Hele believes:

Only out-and-out Platonists, for whom all European philosophy is in Whitehead's phrase a 'series of footnotes to Plato', look upon Christianity and pantheism as mere branches on the tree of Platonism. It is more generally agreed, however, that the

Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul owes much to Plato. This suggests that Shelley may have accepted the Christian soul-concept until it parts company with Plato's by importing more detail. And we have already seen how insistently he advocated Christian morality. Yet he was vilified by the Christians of his day, because he accepted the label 'atheist'. (King-Hele, 1984, p.202).

In *On Death*, Shelley asks: Who telleth a tale of unspeaking death? /Who lifteth the veil of what is to come? (Shelley, 1905, p. 524) Shelley believes that the body will return to the dust, and the spirit will exist forever. Bloom once said: "To Shelley, for all his religious temperament, death is wholly natural, and if death is dead, then nature must be dead also" (Bloom, 2005, p.141).

After *Fragment on Keats*, Shelley wrote another poem *Adonais*, which not only expresses admiration and a longing feeling for Keats once again, but "With more distinct traits of the personality, Shelley writes a hard fate imprinted in the heart of deep feelings" (Brandes, 1997, p.270). Plotinus thinks that the soul has a tendency to approach nature and if combined with the material world, it will be corrupted. If one must overcome this fall, he must return to the "oneness", which can be divided into three stages: the first stage is the purification of the soul, that is to say, the soul points to the pure mind from material bondage; the second stage is the rational thought, at this stage it is the concept of purity; the third stage is lost in thought or intuition. When a man reaches a trance, he will reject all the emotional factors and rational judgment and eventually he can be one with God. *Adonais* points out that the human's whereabouts after death and finds out that the source of the universe spirit: "Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow Back to the burning fountain whence it came" (Shelley, 2000, III, p.223). At the end of the poem Shelley prophesies his impending death: "The soul of Adonais, like a star, Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are" (Shelley, 2000, p.224). Bloom believes: "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, 2005, p.139)

## CONCLUSION

There may be a kind of power or rule to govern everything in the universe. The human soul is perhaps such part of power with the universe spirit, which can be understood by man's transcendental powers and rules. The soul is like water, and the body can change, but the soul, like the energy conversion will not die. The spirit of nature or the individual soul praised by Shelley, has the characteristics of the reincarnation of the soul, and the experience in the long journey of transmigration of souls in the universe including inorganic minerals and organic matters such as plants, animals and human beings. In the three levels of the soul, there is no doubt that the human soul is the

highest form of soul. Human beings are the results of the universal evolution and combination of elements. The soul is like water. The core of the human soul belongs to a part of the universe. As the natural individual the human soul goes into the river, there are a lot of desires, and in the river what humans want to do is to achieve the pursuit of the human soul to really perfect itself, but in any case, the human soul from the individual view is the shadow of the universe soul.

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