



An Analysis of Shelley’s Love

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Abstract

Shelley was renowned for his romantically passionate poems, and his controversial personal life and characteristics remain a butt of argument. From the perspective of personality psychology, this essay examines some of the crucial critiques and works of Shelley, suggests that Shelley may be a candidate for histrionic personality disorder.

Key words: Shelley; Free love; Personality disorder; Histrionic personality

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INTRODUCTION

Percy Bysshe Shelley, one the most notorious poets in Romantic Britain, remains an enigmatic figure in the literary history. What kind of man indeed is he like? Is Shelley a demonic dandy in the eyes of his contemporaries, or the legendary hero for the young revolutionaries? Or, as labeled by the eye-catching title of a website, Shelley was a “neurotic poet”? Along with his outrageously flaming lines and scandalous personal anecdotes, Shelley’s life, full of sensuous pleasure, has become an eternal gossiping butt for poetry critics. Then what’s the personality of Percy Bysshe Shelley? This essay is trying to examine the poet from the perspective of personality psychology.

1. THE HISTRIONIC PERSONALITY

About a century ago, when *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published, no one would imagine it was to sway the literary criticism so much. Literary studies extend arms towards all the illuminations from various findings of human civilization. As modern psychology has become full-fledged since Sigmund Freud’s studies on consciousness, literary critics cannot hesitate to benefit from the inspirations of personality studies to pore over poets – the most mysterious while messy minds in the human history. A type of disordered personality is diagnosed as histrionics in abnormal psychology. Although the studies into histrionic personality have been taken from ancient Greeks, they have been treated as the symptom with a womb going astray. Researchers found that more women than men were prone to be caught down with the allegedly hysterical disorders. It was Freud who described the histrionic syndrome in the category of hysteria. Bernheim and Charcot ascribed the disordered personality to hysterically outbursting emotions suppressed by obstruction in feelings venting (Million, 2007, p.152).

Freud regarded hysteria a recompense of suppressed sexual desire, while Theodore Million considered it a disordered personality and elaborated this symptom with concrete illustrations. Simply speaking, modern psychology describes the histrionic personality as people try to catch public attention with desperate emotional demonstrations in pompous or provocative manners in order to seek admiration. Panting after the attention from a big audience, histrionics sway glamorous dramatics on the stage of their life. Besides, in the society, people with histrionic maneuvers are often regarded charming because of their outgoing, hilarious tempers.

2. SHELLEY THE DRAMA KING

Is Shelley a histrionic person? Let’s approach him by a smattering of his personal living history. The chronology

of this poet is a gossip of juicy tidbits. Born as the eldest son from a baronet family on August, 4th 1792, Shelley outperformed as an active and highly imaginative child, which caused a long lasting worship from his girl cousins. As a rebellious student, Shelley was not content at Eton nor at Oxford. During his college years, he “dressed and behaved with provoking eccentricity”, wrote an illegally atheistic essay which incurred his expel from school and from his paternal family (Drabble, 1985, p.894).

Shelley also extolled the boundless love in his essay “On Love” and tried to share his wife with a boyhood friend Hogg, later kept a triangular relationship with Mary Shelley and Jane ‘Claire’ Clairmont for strikingly eight years (Drabble, 1985, p.895). Bidding little refusal to Clairmont, Shelley seems enjoying the scandalous affairs quite a lot. In the essay “Rereading Shelley”, Gary Farnell examines the repeated shell imagery in Shelley’s poetry, calling readers’ attention to the poet’s traumatic symptoms lurking in his romantic lines (Farnell, 1993, p.625). According to Millon, histrionic patients aim at appearing to others’ expectations, and some patients develop a consuming passion for “excitement seeking and excessive activity” (Silverstein, 2007, p.155). In the countryside of Italy, Shelley read, sitting naked beside a pool in the forest (Fraser, 1997, p.120). The exoticism regarding to sexual love is the fulfillment of Shelley’s histrionic traits – which prompt this type of man to search for popular gaze by eccentric deeds. The all-inclusive but superficial interest of Shelley is also a histrionic way of cognition. As Fraser states, he “tasted all blossoms, confining himself to none” (Fraser, 1997, p.121). What is more, histrionic patients can fall in romance easily while having difficulty in keeping a single-mindedly committed relationship. Out of heroic passion, Shelley eloped with a “miserable” youngster girl Harriet and married her. However, this romance didn’t sustain long enough to their birth of the first child. Getting tired of shallow Harriet and falling in love with the smart Marry, the Mrs Shelley to-be, Shelley couldn’t wait to get away with Harriet. This triangle, caused by Shelley’s flighty amour, resulted in Harriet suicidal sinking in the lake. As “Epipsychidion” is a “defense of free love” (Fraser, 1997, p.122), Shelley’s careless love and carefree abandonment definitely are causes of Harriet’s tragedy. To some extent, it is not too cruel to conclude that the drowning of Shelley is the working of karma. Crisman refigured an image of Shelley into a “loveless child” through reading “Alastor” and “The Witch of Atlas” (Crisman, 1986, p.148). As commented by Havens (1102), the poem “Alastor” pours out the desire of enjoying an ideal companionship would destroy the poet himself. The true victim of this affair is Harriet, while Shelley sheds tears only for himself in his lines. Almost all the contemporary biographical critics of Shelley have found out his riotous temper.

Shelley also demonstrates the syndrome of hypochondria – an accompanying anxiety of histrionic

disorders – imagining him suffering elephantiasis after seeing a fat leg of a woman. The histrionic somatic syndromes also explain the question why he quivers with painful hits. At the age of twenty-seven, Shelley was baffled by hints of grey hair, which prompted him to write the most famous “Ode to the West Wind” (Woodcock X X X IV). Although the ending exclamation struggles to be upbeat, it cannot save the depressed emotions rolling over in most of the lines. The sentimentalist self-mourning can seldom be saved by a nirvana-like ending.

When his seeing Mary was frustrated by her parents, Shelley took laudanum and a pistol to her house to threaten Mary’s parents with suicide. With this dramatic performance, Shelley successfully made the reluctant Mr. Godwin gave in. With little considering about the honor and sentiments of his beloved lady, Shelley fulfilled his self-sanctioned enterprise with dauntless brazen courage. This adventure was renowned as an adventure of a romantic temper, albeit it demonstrated the hysterical suicidal cries of histrionic personality. Well versed in manipulating others’ responses with sentimental dramatics, histrionic people tend to threaten others with their own lives in frustration. Dated in 1789, Shelley’s attempts to suicide were documented in biographers such as in *A Mary Shelley Chronology* (Garrett, 2002, p.3). In the name of free love, Shelley exploited his women in totally an insane way. From the anecdotes and letters, readers can catch a glimpse of the poet’s scattered and superficial concerns about his romantic aspirations.

As is pointed out in “Shelley’s Doctrine of Love” (Stovall, 1930, p.283), love for Shelley is a cosmic force, or, is the activity of the material world and human beings. It works as the dynamic and healing action for all the world (Stovall, 1930, p.293). In poems and prose, Shelley plays the prophet who offers hope to the down trodden populace. The lavish display of affection and emotions is prevalent in Shelley’s works. The overwrought self-pity in lines of “Ode to the West Wind” can be vaguely felt by sensitive readers, while the mushy melodramatics are too blatant in the dramatics in *The Cenci*. Putting it a “poetical circumstance” (1964, p.154), Shelley adopts the incestuous rape theme to make a sensational topic on purpose to lure audience’s envoyeur attentions.

3. DRAMATICS IN THE LINES

Meaningful or meaningless, whenever Shelley is making a statement in his works, the voice is sublimely wrought and the narrating point of view is always approached from the first person “I”. Most often, eager to make himself sound overwhelming or sublime, Shelley speaks from “I”: “Thou shalt behold the present; I will teach / The secrets of the future” (pp.66-67). Although it is conventional for a poet to speak from the first person point of view, the grandiosity in Shelley’s utterances in poetry is comparatively much more remarkable. The “I”

is always a prophet or godly spirit rather than a messenger like Wordsworth. Take this legendary work *Queen Mab* for example, the "I" in Shelley's lines always appear overwhelmingly heroic and sublime,

I see thee shrink, Surpassing spirit! – wert thou human else?
I see a shade of doubt and horror fleet Across thy stainless
features: yet fear not; There is no unconnected misery, Nor
stands uncaused, and irretrievable. (pp.70-75)

It is quiet at ease of Shelley to assume the role of an encourager or preacher, to reassure, to spread ointment or therapy, against his counterpart role as the butt of a timid, wondering, and innocent creature. The self-sublimation is not as modest as he designs. And the "unconnect misery", with its following two negated attributions "uncaused", "irretrievable", doesn't make clear enough sense in describing the human sufferings. Like "stainless feature", the images in Shelley's works seem absolute while vague with little touching texture as well as precision. In "Falsehood and Vice", the speaker is talking to a nation from high above like a prophetic angel,

To hear a famished nation's groans (2) Brother! arise from the
dainty fare, Which thousands have toiled and bled to bestow; A
finer feast for thy hungry ear Is the news that I bring of human
woe. (Falsehood and Vice, pp.13-16)

Through the objective scrutiny of these lines, the voice of a sage, the stand of a god standing far above the populace, the wisdom and swaying power are not beyond our reach. The little Shelley, proudly talking among a group of admiring sisters, keeps talking in his lines afterwards. These grand sounding poems are comparatively powerless for its vacancy in concrete images.

The poet no longer feels satisfied as a backstage figure himself, Shelley makes strong voice to speak in his lines with the efforts rising to their surface, as demonstrated in:

Worlds on worlds are rolling ever From creation to decay, Like
the bubbles on a river Sparkling, bursting, borne But they are
still immortal away.
Who, through birth's orient portal And death's dark chasm
hurrying to and fro, Clothe their unceasing flight In the brief
dust and light Gathered around their chariots as they go. (Hellas,
pp.197-206)

The "triumph of life" is absolutely the triumph of the poet's grand ego. A brand picture is visualized in the first line, and the following line tries hard to catch the sublime tone. However, intentionally or not, the third line has turned out a falling down with its trivial and translucent image "bubbles." Shelley's over wrought style appears habitually quite brilliant at the opening utterance, but it often loses its tension in its completing descriptions. Like an actor who is too eager to catch the audience, Shelley pours out his magnificent power in the first lines, failing to catch up the breath shouting ahead. This is identical to those patients diagnosed with histrionic disorder. They who always work hard to make great first impressions in

front of strangers, succeeding to manipulate other people with their "stunning" charms, don't have the stigma to work on polishing their personality. That is why the drama kings or queens fail to keep long-term relationships. Shelley doesn't maintain his all-upthrowing debut in the first two lines, makes it a hint of ridiculousness with his "bubbles" image. Rather than brushing out a similarly sublime world, Shelley tells readers they are still "immortal". The complementary antithesis of "birth" and "death", "dust" and "light" don't make sparkling contradiction in sense, on the contrary, it slims into the typical Shelley's philosophical crisis.

There we also find oozily monotonous exclamations such as "Spirit!" "Spirit!" in *Queen Mab* (Shelley, pp.157-158). Readers don't always waltz through all those lines ejaculating apostrophes on and on. The histrionic cognition is described as shallow and impressionistic in the modern personality psychology. We can examine Shelley's way of understanding the world by a glance at his notes and drafts (Goslee, 1985, p.211). The wild but smattering passion in natural sciences of Shelley is also noted in the Romantic period, but his scientific and technical proposals marked with his "slipshod and undisciplined" research caused specialists' giggles (Ruston 74). According to Stovall, to love as well as to boat, for Shelley is but "momentary satisfaction" (Stovall, 1930, p.302) It is a typical syndrome of histrionic people to have difficulties in holding out a long-lasting relationship. Histrionic emotions tend to be extremely dizzy and transient. A person cannot always prevent his pen leaking his heart through the written lines. The whining heroes in Shelley's works are also regarded as personification of the author's smothering desire for narcissistic fulfillment (Witt, 1998, p.206).

Shelley in his "Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists" writes:

Rousseau gave license by his writings to passions that only incapacitate and contract the human heart. So far hath he prepared the necks of his fellow-beings for that yoke of galling and dishonorable servitude which at this moment it bears. (Prose, p. 67)

Assuming the same speaking voice for the misery of human beings, Shelley prizes himself much more magnificent than the confessional Rousseau. When it comes to philosophical discussion, Shelley seems impatient in analysis, instead, he keeps throwing out figures with emotional tags on his objects.

4. LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF SHELLEY'S HISTRIONIC EMOTIONS

The particular histrionic patients always embellish their encounters with excessive emotions, like the sweepingly rhapsodic tone in "Mont Blank" and "Adonais" the elegiac poem in memory to John Keats, the outpouring of sorrows

like “Ah, woe is me!” (Ferguson, p.811). At the same time, the lines also smell a wraith of envy. What is worse, Shelley is reasonably accused of creating the story of Keats’ death and taking advantage of it (Heffernan, p.295). The poor Keats, although mourned with showering tears in Shelley’s lines, is but a crying trigger of the emotional and passionate poet. As stated in the opening line of “Adonais”, “I weep for Adonais, – he is dead!” The poem stresses on the move of weeping and mourning, rather than memory to Adonais. In the name of elegy, the poem “Adonais” speaks the author’s self-pitiful sentimentality with bold confidence.

Shelley’s poetry is prone to be high-pitched and obscure. The flowery tenderness is typical of Shelley’s lyrics, as the “feverish dream of stagnant woe” (Fraser, p.121). However, readers still feel the antiseptic heart through close reading. One cause of Shelley’s dramatics is his desperation in pursuit of talents – demonstrating talents to the public. A real talented man doesn’t bother to do this, mediocrity needs it. Readers can learn from comments on Shelley that this man is outstanding in his passion, personal charisma, and frenzy of interests, instead of genius on words or sciences. Admittedly Shelley’s topics of poetry can transcend from the worldly issues, his personal perspective cannot guard him against uttering the universal truth. Passionated with all the knowledge and wisdom in the universe, Shelley has construed himself a perfect ego of omniscient philosopher and scientist. With all the efforts of trying to be an atheist scientist, Shelley could not escape from the discourse of a god.

Examining Shelley’s poems, essays and letters, we can somehow find that he is always beating around the bush. When he is creating images, he turns to the statement; when he needs to deal with issues, he calls for flowery figures; when he has to sort out a debate, he hops to impress the audience with his stance. Shelley’s language shines with sublimity, but doesn’t sustain power because of his impatience to face the immediate issue, or phrases. The linguistic features of Shelley tell his dramatic symptoms – the gaudy style of expression full of flaunting expressions. His poetry, joining with Walter Whitman, has been crowned for fully concerned with mushy humanistic sympathies. Seen from that perspective, the furious romantic frenzy is outpoured from the spring of dramatic desires.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the hysterical detest of being common is the motivation of taking a revolutionary stance. We cannot avoid the possibility that the elevated philosophy of free love is but a dandy like self-defense, and the altruistic but vague spirit of fighting but a showing-off. It is not pleasant to find out that the skylark soaring high above the sky is but a naughty peacock. Although there is solid evidence to diagnose Percy Bysshe Shelley a histrionic personality with dramatic manners, it is not fair enough

to label him histrionic. It is not terribly ridiculous to find out that many of the literary figures oversensitive, timid, and even desperate underneath their high-profile works sonorous with flowery metaphors. Poetry, the pearl condensed of oceanic human laughter and tears, dawns upon the most innocent hearts with almost manic passions in pursuit. Furthermore, to justifiably state that Shelley is a histrionic person in real life is risky for the lack of close clinical observations. This is merely a try poring into the psychological interpretations of a romantic poet. Dramatically pretending romantic hero, Shelley, in his works, is always obsessed with his charms and self-fancy. Anyway, William Shakespeare concludes without reserve, “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, are of imagination all compact.”

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