

Dimensionalities of the Death Theme in Shelley's Poetry

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Abstract

This article, combined with the historical and cultural background, displays and expounds the dimensionality of the theme of death in Shelley's poetry. Its dimensionality can be concluded into such aspects as secularity, philosophy, religion, mind and universe. Such dimensionalities are not only closely associated with western philosophy, western religion and literature tradition, but also conveys Shelley's attitude to life and his unique idea of soul.

Key words: Shelley; Death; Spirit

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INTRODUCTION

Death, without doubt, is a timeless and regular theme in literature. German philosopher Martin Heidegger holds that human is being-to-death. In the history of English literature, "If there be considered merely the absolute quantity of what a great variety of poets have said about death, few will be found to have written so much, either romantically or otherwise, upon the subject as did Shelley" (Kurtz, 1933, XI-XII). There was a lot about

the theme of death in Shelley's works such as *On Death, Lines: The cold earth slept below, To William Shelley, On Fanny Godwin, Death, To Death, Fragment on Keats, and On a faded violet and Adonais*. It is obvious that the cycle of life, death and nature in holistic thinking level has been accompanied in the thought and the creation of Shelley. This topic has aroused extensive attention of domestic and foreign researchers such as Benjamin Putnam Kurtz and Lu Xun. Lu Xun thinks Shelley accepted Plato and Bacon in the view of death, because Shelley believes that only death can escape from body's prison and the secret of life lies in death (Lu, 2005, p.89). But so far scholars have still not given systematic interpretation of the theme of death in Shelley's poetry, and this paper intends to explore the theme of death in Shelley's poems, showing the multiple dimensions, and focusing on the its relationship between the western philosophy, religion and literature tradition.

1. THE SECULAR DIMENSION OF DEATH

It is indisputable that to some extent a poet's individual experience and his social background can influence his works and attitudes towards life and death. In Shelley's short life he experienced a lot of life and death. The consciousness of death is an important characterization of his melancholy soul, and the death of his family and friends eventually makes this theme become a part of his life and it is clearly difficult to separate the poet from his poetry. The poet created a full of scenes and atmosphere of the dead world in *Lines*. The cold earth slept below, and the source of light reflected by the moon is only a pale woman, which means a fear of the death is vividly revealed in this poem. The poem from either the title or poetry itself is a little obscure, and it is mysteriously narrated by Shelley for his first wife Harriet's suicide in the river. In the poem *On Fanny Godwin*, Shelley mourns the death of Fanny Godwin, his second wife Mary's sister,

who was also deeply in love with Shelley. Fanny had no chance to express her love to Shelly and eventually proved her deep love by means of death. Shelly did not make up for the past and thought of his own experience of suffering mutability and misery, only sighing: Misery—O Misery, /This world is all to wide for thee (Shelley, 1905, p.546). The death of Fanny shows that the women around Shelley mostly had tragic fate more or less. The immortality of the soul is another expression of death. In the poem *To William Shelley*, Shelley cherishes deeply the memory of his son's death: My lost William, thou in whom/ Some bright spirit lived, and did /That decaying robe consume (Shelley, 1905, p.581). The human soul is confined in 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 rebirth. Shelley believes in the immortality of the soul of Plato, and he explores the true meaning of life with a detached attitude towards death. Death is just physical destruction, which takes the people we love, but through this stage after death the immortality of the soul can obtain eternal life. 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). Only In this way does Shelley push such secular death up to religious and even cosmic level. Obviously his view of the immortality of the soul is that life may change.

2. DEATH IN THE DIMENSION OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

In the face of death Socrates believes that the true philosophers have been practicing death. From the perspective of death, Shelley deserves to be a philosopher. Lu Xun once pointed out that "Shelley was really dead, but it was Shelley who knows the truth of death." (Lu, 2005, p.89) In the poem *Ode to the West Wind*, the poet compares the seed of the new life to "Each like a corpse within its grave" (Shelley, 1905, p.577). This contradiction between life and death, which is just like the new and the old, coexists in the same thing. The old things contain new seeds, and this is the poet's interpretation of the law of the universe. There is no doubt that Shelley holds a philosopher's attitude to the death in the poem *Ode to the West Wind*. Similarly, in the poem *Fragment: Life Rounded with Sleep*, Shelley says: The babe is at peace within the womb; /The corpse is at rest within the tomb: / We begin in what we end (Shelley, 1905, p.659). Death is very close to life, which is just like "We begin in what we end". A birth means the end of another life, and life and death are so infinite in circles. Shelley saw the beauty of death as "the tempestuous loveliness of terror"

(Shelley, 1905, p.583) in the poem *On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci*. A terrible death endowed with eternal vitality puts an end to life but it also breeds life. In the poem *Mutability*, beautiful clouds with coming night will disappear, as the brilliant life will lose its luster when death comes. In the short life, there is not only sweet enjoyment, but more unpredictable pain and fate. They often sadly pass away all of a sudden when people haven't experienced the joy of life and the essence of life. At the end of the poem *Mutability* Shelley signs: "Nought may endure but Mutability." (Shelley, 1905, p.523) Compared with the short life relatively, it is mutability or death that is eternal and unchanging. This poem shows Shelley's view that life is short and is difficult to control and also contains his love for life, and eventually embodies the poet's detached philosophy of death. In the poem *Death* Shelley also shows his philosophy of death: "Dust claims dust—and we die too. /All things that we love and cherish, /Like ourselves must fade and perish; /Such is our rude mortal lot." (Shelley, 1905, p.622)

Heidegger proposed that death is a kind of existing way of one's living, and it exists all through one's life and determines life's content, value and responsibility. Confucius also said that one could not properly understand life without also grasping something about death. Shelly believes that death is everywhere and we human being are death. The Bible also says that man is from the dust and after death man will go back to the dust. From this perspective his philosophy of death is characteristic of religion. In the essay *On a Future State* Shelley thinks death is human being's inexhaustible melancholy: We know no more than that those external organs, and all that fine texture of material frame, without which we have no experience that life or thought can subsist, are dissolved and scattered abroad. The body is placed under the earth, and after a certain period there remains no vestige even of its form. This is that contemplation of inexhaustible melancholy, whose shadow eclipses the brightness of the world (Shelley, 1905, VII, p.206). Obviously Shelley's concept of death not only has a Plato's detached style, but also has a Schopenhauer type of desolation. In the poem *To a Skylark* Shelley writes: Waking or asleep, /Thou of death must deem/Things more true and deep / Than we mortals dream, Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream? (Shelley, 1905, p.603) From a religious perspective, the poem interprets the basic tenets of christianity. In the label "atheist", Shelley knows well of the Bible and actually believes the existence of God. Shelley is always looming with a Christian complex and pays some special attention to the essence of Christian doctrine. For death, Christians do not believe that death is the end of everything, and think people is composed of three parts which are spirit, soul and body. Death is just the soul leaving the body. In the poem *Death*, Shelley holds the view that everything is mortal and so

death is vanity. Everything will be deathly destroyed, but love will never die. Love is the power of 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 human stand in the death of the endless pain. Christian can be magnanimous in the face of death, because they have a higher spiritual pursuit, and that is the eternal life. In this regard, there are many misconceptions about Shelley, but King-Hele believes:

Only out-and-out Platonists, for whom all European philosophy is in white head'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 he found his company with Plato's by importing more details. 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 the poem *On Death*, Shelley uses a series of parallelism sentences to inquiry the world after death: Who telleth a tale of unspeaking death? /Who lifted the veil of what is to come? (Shelley, 1905, p.524) It can be said that Shelley's anxiety on death is implemented in his doubt on his future, and this poem breaks the time and space dimension, and this poem is like a lamentation with a relatively strong religious color. Shelley believes the doomsday, but the body will return to the dust, and the spirit will exist forever. The living comforts themselves by lamenting the dead, just as 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)

3. DEATH IN THE DIMENSION OF SPIRIT AND UNIVERSE

Sigmund Freud once said that if you want to live you should make preparations for death and only when a person is prepared for death can he understand the value of life. In the metaphor of death and sleep and from the perspective of psychology as long as the dead still live in our unconsciousness, they are asleep, and after the funeral, they are absent and are some more subtle sleepers. According to the study of archaeology and folklore, at first people see death as sleep, and after death and in the sleep everything around them is unconscious. In the poem *Fragment: Apostrophe to Silence*, Shelley calls silence, death and sleep as three brothers: "Silence! / Oh, well are Death and Sleep and Thou/Three brethren named, the guardians gloomy-winged" (Shelley, 1905, p.569). After their death or in their sleep people are silent. In the poem *Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples*, Shelley writes: Till death like sleep might steal on me (Shelley, 1905, p.562). Shelley and Byron had a similar view of death

and sleep. In fact, youth is gone, which is also a kind of death. In the poem *On a Faded Violet*, Shelley laments the fleeting young love. Flowers and love are beautiful, but always short, and the sensitive, affectionate and sincere poet has been triggered by withered flowers to express his feeling on the short love. This kind of feeling also lies in the poem *Time Long Past*: "Like the ghost of a dear friend dead / Is Time long past. A tone which is now forever fled, / A hope which is now forever past, / A love so sweet it could not last, / Was Time long past." (Shelley, 1905, p.632)

Everything is just like a beautiful flower epiphyllum and its beauty belongs to the past, but what left is a pity and endless yearning. After the poem *Fragment on Keats*, Shelley wrote the poem *Adonais*, which not only expresses admiration and miss 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). The poem *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 Shelly prophesies his impending death: "The soul of *Adonais*, like a star, Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are" (Shelley, 2000, III, 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)

The suffering that the poet experienced can be showed in the early poem *Invocation to Misery*. His first marriage ended in failure, and some of his friends died at that time, which makes Shelley's sensitive and especially the death of his first wife makes Shelly think of suicide. In 1815 he put the imagination of death into the poem *Alastor*, Bloom believes: "But the recent imagining of his own death lingers on in *Alastor*, which on one level is the poet's elegy for himself" (Bloom, 2005, p.122). Moreover, Bloom also believes: "*Alastor* prophesies *The Triumph of Life*, and in the mocking light of the later poem the earlier work appears also to have been a dance of death" (Bloom, 2005, p.122). Shelley thinks that life is a great mystery and only death is the only way to uncover the mystery. Death is a relief and also is the best path of being a close to the truth and returning to the spirit of the cosmos. The sea can be regarded as the universe of love, sleep and death. Shelley has a special love for the sea, but he can not swim and a few times want to suicide by drowning in the pursuit of a perfect life. Shelley has a persistent suicidal tendency, namely, the temptation of love for water in death. In Shelley's diseased and wound flesh and in his tired and filling soul, the hour of thinking is like the water of life full of regret tears. From natural clock dripping down, the fleeting time, like a water shadow, is a kind of melancholy

and crying uneasy and swallowing up the poet. To his late life, Shelley repeatedly talked about death and his deliberation of death is also his deliberation of freedom. His interest in death accelerates the deformation of his heart. He pays more attention to the soul after death, and he has developed his view of the immortality of the soul by knowing the life cycle of the plant. He has changed from a materialistic person into an idealist, and he no longer believes that a person's body is not the most important, because his ailing body can only bring him pain and suffering and he hopes that his soul can escape early from his own body. Therefore, he sings the song of praise of death and hopes his soul from their body shell can be back to life. There is sufficient evidence to show that Shelley's death was not accidental in the storm, but his deliberate choice. He died from drowning in the sea water which seems for him to have realized Heraclitus's intuition on water. Death itself is water. Water becomes the invitation of death, and death can make us back to the origin of the universe. Death is the first real trip. Death is part of life in the universe. Life beyond death is also a kind of wisdom and a kind of ethics. The poet's words have been fulfilled and he uncovered the black curtain with his young life. In the essay *On a Future State*, Shelley explains the whereabouts of the soul after death with the 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)

Shelley believes that organic compounds can be decomposed into other substances, and such conversion can take place between substances. Since the matter is indestructible, the soul should be eternal. Shelley just uses poetry as the medium, shuttling between the human and the universe, and puts the dead from the linear time irreversible back into the life cycle time of the universe. Shelley's poetry is full of "the breath of eternal soul" (Sampson, 1987, p.26), which finally gives his great achievements of his poetics of the universe soul. Shelley, through the pursuit of death and his active choice of drowning in the storm sea, completed his magnificent turn, which is undoubtedly the corroboration of Lee Hunter's three sentences' evaluation of the poet's inscriptions from Shakespeare drama *The Tempest*: "Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange." (Shelley, 2000, VII, p.540)

CONCLUSION

Shelley expressed his comprehension of death in his poetry and readers can know clearly about the poet's inner world and communicate with his soul by reading his poems. During his life of solitude and contemplation away from the noisy world, Shelley explores the true meaning of life, death and immortality. Shelley thinks that death is not the end of life, but a kind of self rescue, and death is the sublimation of life, and death is the way to happiness of the eternal soul. The theme of death in Shelley's poems is his thinking about the meaning of death. For Shelley, the world suffering is his personal suffering. Shelley portrays himself as a lonely and poor man. He always thinks of suffering and death in his life, because he had too many hardships. No matter where people come from, all will end in death. A poet has a kind of reverse thinking of life itself, which is the understanding and interpretation of death. The poet can transfer a kind of common human spirit and emotion. All the emotions, imagination, and the depiction of strength in Shelley's poetry can be attributed to a kind of power of Metaphysics. He always enjoy it and indulges himself in them. Shelley's view on death touches the core of Shelley's metaphysics, and therefore his works and his life also have the full meaning of the soul.

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