

### Permanence in Memory

Percy Bysshe Shelley's posthumously published poem "Music When Soft Voices Die" speaks, as many poems do, of death. Shelley's poem focuses on the lasting nature of things, most plausibly the memories of a person even after his/her death. "Music When Soft Voices Die" seems to be a poem that Shelley wrote in reference to the thought of losing someone whom he cares about or the cessation of something Shelley enjoys. It evokes a feeling of bitter-sweetness concerning termination and the permanence of a man and their creations as the memory of them echoes forever in eternity.

Shelley is undeniably choosing in some fashion to focus on termination, be it of art or of body. The rhyme scheme for this poem is AABB, causing the non-rhyming lines to have a direct correlation. The odd number lines (1, 3, 5, and 7) show death and termination (these lines respectively end with "die," "sicken," "dead," and "gone"), while the even number lines (2, 4, 6, 8), show that these brief events live forever. These even number lines all highlight the positive notes of the poem, which is significant as the odd number lines, which highlight the negative points, open this poem but it closes with the even, positive lines. This seems to show that while at first we greet the end of a life, song, poem etc. as with lament, with time we come to accept the end and rejoice that it even happened at all.

The poem compares the death of a human to the dying of music as music "vibrates" and continues to be heard even after the musician is done playing. It also equates this to the lasting "odour" of flowers even after they have "sickened," or died. This is rich with symbolism, both of the death of a human and the ending of art. In the second stanza Shelley makes the final simile relating the poem's imagery to a human aspect. This stanza seems to be describing the funeral procession and the process of commemoration.

The poem opens with a seemingly happy note that is soon dashed before the end of the first line. The first line introduces the idea of the emotional ups and downs in this poem

and shows the notions of art/death and light/dark that are central in the poem. The very first word of the poem, “music,” is highly associated with art, facilitating the notion of man’s creations playing a role in this poem. This idea of eternity in art is something Shelley has used in other poems such as “Ozymandias” and an idea that Shelley uses lightly in this work. However, the idea that Shelley is also choosing to commemorate the death of a loved one is more evident as the passage goes on.

The first line includes the phrase “soft voices.” The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) lists a plethora of definitions for “soft,” the first being “producing agreeable or pleasant sensations; characterized by . . . quiet enjoyment; of a calm or placid nature.” This almost seems paradoxical as this definition involves the term quiet. With this definition the voices are pleasing, as Shelley and any other poet would hope their memories, poetry, art and other creations would be. The OED also defines soft as it applies to “odour,” which is remarked on in the next line. “Soft” thereby becomes a bridge between these lines and between the sounds and scents, almost akin to synesthesia. Overall, soft creates a pleasant tonation in a darker opening, implying that even in the darkness of the death there is a light and that light comes from the “voices.”

The use of the word “when” is very powerful. “When” can imply a variety of situations and emotions. It can imply an inevitability; Shelley does not say, “If soft voices die” but rather “when soft voices die.” This interpretation speaks to the inevitable termination of all men and all things. “When” can also imply an uncertainty; the speaker does not know definitively when the music will end just as he could not know when he or any others may end. This interpretation furthers the idea of untimely death and the true uncertain impermanence of man. Both of these interpretations are depressing; however, as the poem continues, Shelley makes it clear that though an end is inevitable and uncertain, “memory” causes things to “live within the sense they quicken.”

The second line picks up from the negativity but is not as dense with it. Shelley uses the word “vibrate” to describe music and what it does under some circumstances. Vibrate has numerous meanings, one of which is to “resound or continue to be heard” (OED). Shelley wishes to evoke the feeling that the sound does not merely disappear, as when one

dies they do not simply cease to be, but rather continues on in memory. A separate definition of the word vibrate, though, refers to a pendulum and it swinging to and fro (OED). This meaning, now archaic but well known at the time, creates the image of time passing and as time passes so do we. The imagery of a clock tick-tocking on the wall and time passing is a notion we've come to tie to death and our time coming to an end.

The fact that the voices “vibrate in memory” once “soft voices die” is significant. Voices, as inanimate objects, cannot die. “Die” can mean “to lose force, strength” (OED), which is literally what voices do after time in keeping with the imagery of the poem. “Die” can also mean just what it says, in which case the “voices” become metonymic. The voices could represent a lost loved one in general or possibly Shelley himself. If this is the case then the “soft” would be characteristics of a human, meaning that Shelley is portraying them as “placid,” “agreeable,” and “pleasant.” As Shelley was a political revolutionary, it would be hard to imagine anyone viewing him as placid or agreeable, meaning that with this interpretation, Shelley was not likely referring to himself but rather a lost connection, possibly Keats. Because these “soft voices die” the poem serves as a less direct elegy. This keeps with the idea that Shelley uses this poem to commemorate the loss of someone he cared deeply for.

“Voices” can also be the element of a song and “music,” concurrent with the poem’s imagery. This would mean voices would be associated more with art in this case. Calling the “voices” soft means that the pieces of art are agreeable and pleasant, making this a compliment of the work. It is important that Shelley specifically uses “voices” as “voices” are, by definition, human as opposed to other forms of music such as instruments. Naturally, art, poetry, and music do not “die.” While voices do not die, they do however, “lose force, strength . . . [and] become ‘dead’, flat, vapid, or inactive” (OED). This would mean the art, poetry, etc. would become less and less known and more and more obscure, an artist’s greatest fear. However, these “soft voices” do “vibrate in the memory,” meaning that though not as powerful as the original they are eternal because they are retained in memory. This is true if the “voices” representing humans or art; they are both immortal and eternal in the world of memory.

Shelley expressly uses the word “die,” bringing the mind to think of death. But perhaps the even more powerful, yet subtle, use of the word “memory” pushes the point further. It is significant that Shelley even uses “the” when referring to memory, implying that it is not just any memory but “the memory” in which these “soft voices” “vibrate.” “The memory” could refer to the public “memory” and world entire, meaning that “soft voices” live forever in fame and success. “The memory” could also mean specifically “the memory” of friends, family, and those met along the journey of life, creating a more personal feel for the poem. Memory is defined as “commemorating . . . or remembering,” but more specifically the “act of commemoration, especially of the dead,” (the OED specifically cites this poem’s use of the word). Today, and even back then, the phrase ‘in memory of’ or some other iteration is often used to commemorate the death of a loved one. Memory can heavily connote death and certainly does in this instance, in keeping with the theme of this poem.

In the third and fourth lines Shelley is transitioning from appealing to one’s hearing to appealing to smell. The poem describes the way that even once the flowers have “sickened,” or died, they still “live” in memory. Shelley uses the phrase “sweet violets” in the third line. Using “sweet” as a descriptor, Shelley creates a positive feeling to these flowers and contributes to the imagery of the violets “sicken[ing].” He specifically chose violets for their coloration and what violets have come to symbolize. Roses are red, and violets are blue we are taught at a young age. We have come to contrast the rose, a symbol of life and passion, to the violet, which would logically characterize the opposite. We also come to associate their color, blue, with sadness. When someone is feeling melancholy we say that they are “feeling blue.” This glumness is an emotion that we closely associate with the mourning of a departed loved one. John Reismiller of the American Violet Society (AVS) states that violets “were often used as symbols of . . . mourning.” Reismiller even specifically cites Shelley’s earlier work “On a Faded Violet” to indicate how violets are used “to commemorate the grief of a lost love,” the precise theme of this poem. Violets, also, are diminutive and less flagrant than the rose, perhaps indicating that the person or idea being alluded to is less famous or even obscure.

On top of choosing violets, Shelley also states that these violets “sicken.” Sicken could mean to become affected with illness. This definition expresses a depressing theme and pervades the idea of death with which this poem is rich. If the violets “sicken,” then their “odour” would sicken as well and they would not smell as heavenly as before. However it would still “live within the sense they quicken,” where quicken means to enliven (Greenblatt 820). “Odour” could literally mean smell, and this would mean that the violet, even after they have “sickened,” will “live” forever in the memory of the smell. “Odours” could again be a stand in for the departed, where “sicken” means to die and living “in the sense they quicken” would mean surviving in the memory of their loved ones by all the things they “quicken[ed].”

Sicken also has another definition; it also means “to pine with yearning” (OED). Shelley would certainly have been aware of this double meaning (the OED cites Shelley’s earlier use sicken for its definition). The idea that sicken could also mean pine with yearning makes this poem less a depressing narrative on death and more a remembrance and commemoration of the love Shelley felt.

In Shelley’s final four lines he emphasizes the passion of the now dead love that will never truly die but instead will “slumber on,” living forever in memory. This stanza commemorates a lost loved one and makes it clear the imagery is relating to a human. The poem closes with the notion of eternity of man, and art.

Shelley uses roses to contrast the use of violets earlier. While both are used for mourning and grief, Riklef Kandeler and Wolfram Ullrich point out that roses “are widely used even today as symbols of love and beauty.” Additionally, the color red is often associated with life and vitality. The poem points out that the rose is, however, dead. This is in keeping with the theme of the poem, but also shows us that the departed was like a rose to Shelley. Shelley desires to show that the departed was once beautiful, passionate, and vivacious which serves to show the impact of their loss.

The fifth line and sixth lines state that “Rose leaves . . . are heaped for the beloved’s bed.” Shelley chooses to state rose leaves intentionally rather than the entirety of the rose as line five correlates directly with line seven, meaning Shelley hopes to liken the leaf to the

thought. The rose leaf mentioned in line five is a part of the whole rose just as the thoughts mentioned in line seven are a part of the whole person. This means that while the body of the man, just like the body of the rose, may no longer be the thoughts, just as the leaves, remain. And more than that, the “leaves . . . are heaped” atop a “bed,” meaning they are compiled and evident to see. This is strikingly similar to a cemetery, where dead bodies are congregated and marked for eternal remembrance. It is also strikingly similar to a compendium of a man’s thoughts or opus to be read and remembered forever.

The poem’s sixth line states that the rose leaves are “heaped for the beloved’s bed.” The use of the word beloved is fairly straightforward and furthers the point of how significant and loved this unnamed person is to the poet. The use of the word “bed,” however, plays a two-fold purpose. In one case, bed could mean the funeral bed that the corpse is lain upon. This could refer to a normal bed, inciting a romantic feeling in the poem and implying that Shelley’s lost one shared some sexual connection with him. That would mean the “belovèd” would be the deceased by this definition’s meaning and that the bed would be a piece of furniture. This fits the theme of death and goes well with the eighth line’s use of the word slumber as the two lines are meant to correlate.

Bed could also be referring to a flowerbed. This meaning causes “belovèd” to mean the exact opposite. Instead of referring to the departed it would refer to the still living. The “belovèd’s bed” would be the flowerbed of the still living flowers, where the flowers of course represent humans. This meaning would be very symbolic, as the leaves would become compost facilitating the growth of the living flowers in the bed as memories of a loved one would facilitate the growth of those left behind. “Leaves” could refer to the pages of a book. This continues with the imagery of art, particularly a poet’s art written on pages. These pages being “heaped for the beloved’s bed” would be a commemoration of the departed using their art and creation.

Shelley wrote this poem in 1821, the same year that John Keats, a fellow poet and good friend of Shelley, passed away. On November 29, 1821 he wrote a letter to another close friend, Joseph Severn. Severn was also close to Keats and had actually traveled with Keats to Italy where he died. Keats died of consumption, what we now call tuberculosis, in

February of 1821 at the young age of 25. “Music When Soft Voices Die” could very plausibly be inspired by Keats’s death, even though Shelley has additionally written “Adonais” as Keats’s elegy.

In this letter Shelley states, “In spite of his transcendent genius, Keats never was, nor ever will be, a popular poet.” This shows Shelley’s awareness of a poet’s place of permanence in the world. It has been said that a man dies twice, once when he is put in the ground and the second when his name is spoken for the last time. In this aspect, Shelley might have feared that Keats would die young twice. As such, Shelley’s poem addresses the eternity of man in those who survived them and also lightly touches on the eternity of art.

By using “And so” the poem comes to make the simile between the poem’s earlier references and the human aspect, “thy thoughts.” The use of the word “thy” in the seventh line could mean a variety of things. Thy, being an archaic possessive, could mean that “thy thoughts” live on eternally even when you are dead. This would mean that their thoughts, ideas, and concepts would continue to be proliferated even after their death, which would be of comfort to a poet, and very true as nearly two centuries after his death Shelley’s thoughts are still propounded today. The footnotes to the poem, however, indicate a different interpretation. The footnotes state that it means “my thoughts of thee” (Greenblatt 820 n. 3), making the poem less about the impact of one’s thoughts, actions, and art on eternity. In addition, the poem then seems to be about the impact a person would have on the memories of all those left behind. In either scenario, the poem still resounds a theme of termination and eternity paradoxically coexisting.

Shelley uses the word “gone,” which implies death while not directly stating it. In addition, it can simply imply a departure not necessarily from life but just from the past state of things. This is used in line seven, the last of the odd and negative lines. Gone, however, is far less negative than “die” or “sicken” or “dead,” which are used in the previous odd lines. “Gone” can, in fact, even be positive. This is significant because it shows the light at the end of the tunnel and the acceptance the narrator is coming to have over his grief. In the proceeding line Shelley uses the word “love” to evoke a feeling of caring and to indicate again how dear the departed was to him. He also uses “slumber,” which serves the purpose

of functioning with the imagery of the bed two lines before it and also to further the imagery of death. The OED lists an alternate definition for slumber where it also means “to lie at rest in death or the grave.” All of this furthers the theme of death in the poem. But Shelley does not merely use the word “slumber” but rather uses the phrase “slumber on.” “Slumber on” could mean to continue to slumber, indicating the eternity of “love” which is “slumber[ing] on.” However, “slumber on” could refer to the fact that “love” must “slumber on” something. The poem states that “love . . . shall slumber on” “thy thoughts,” just as the “rose leaves” are “heap’d for the beloved’s bed.” This not only serves to associate these two lines but also creates the imagery of “love” existing atop “thy thoughts.” This would mean that the love of a person, music, etc. exists over the thoughts. This ambiguity is so deep, however, that this engenders more thoughts. This interpretation of “love” “slumbering on” “thy thoughts” could mean that when “thy thoughts” are reminisced upon the “love” is felt for the departed thing, causing a more positive feel of the departed. It could also mean that the “love” being “on” the thoughts is like a blanket, covering over them (working with the bed and slumber imagery) and instead of thinking of the negative “thoughts” and “memories” when that now gone object is thought of only “love” is felt for it.

Ironically, “Music When Soft Voices Die” was published after Shelley’s untimely death. Shelley never could have predicted that he would share such a similar fate to John Keats. As such, it is questionable if he ever realized how much the poem could relate to his own life. His own music vibrated in the ears of his widowed wife, Mary Shelley, and his violets quickened the senses of all who read his poetry. The poem paints a portrait of the man who wrote it and tells a tale in a short eight lines of loss and art eternalizing them in memory.

## Works Cited

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