

## SHELLEY'S POSTHUMOUS DITTY

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### Abstract

*This article will explore one of Percy Bysshe Shelley's posthumous poems, Shelley's "Music, When Soft Voices Die" (1824). Although some assert this verse is one of Shelley's most anthologized and powerful of the young poet's verse, I believe the verse does not entice a great deal of scholarly appreciation, perhaps, because of its length, and; possibly, because some may find the poet's topic of perseverance of memories, events, and sensations to be too ordinary. This commentary makes a thought-provoking reading of Shelley's lyrical fragment by cherishing what some read as too ordinary a subject and viewing Shelley's poem and subject matter as something not only realistic to all of us, but also displays how the ordinary things in one's life are complex by our very nature and sophisticated perspective from this world to the afterlife. This paper also explores various inspirations from this particular lyric; also, it looks at the significance of when it was written and published as it relates to Shelley's premature death, for maybe Shelley was thinking of someone besides his good friend, John Keats, when he was writing this poem.*

**Keywords:** horizon, punctuation, ditty, lyrical, Shelley, music, optimistic, pessimistic, romantic, Eternity, Earth, skylark, ode, Keats

### Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley's lyrical fragment "To —— [Music, when soft voices die]" is a verse that is only two stanzas and larks beyond the voyages of any *Alauda* in Europe. Indeed, John and Henry Hunt published Shelley's little ditty in *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Mary Shelley edits her late spouse's verse, as she explains the process in the 1824 preface to Shelley's posthumous poems: "Many of the Miscellaneous Poems, written on the spur of the occasion, and never retouched, I found among his manuscript books, and have carefully copied: I have subjoined, whenever I have been able, the date of their composition" (214). Nevertheless, Shelley's musical ditty provides a continuous beat with life into our genuine temporal horizon between our terrain and infinity.

### **One's Importance while Living**

As readers, we should observe the structure of Shelley's poetic fragment. We should notice the first stanza has only two complete thoughts. Moreover, the initial stanza contains two nonrestrictive relative clauses. Let us review the first stanza of Shelley's ditty once more:

Music, when soft voices die,  
Vibrates in the memory.—  
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,  
Live within the sense they quicken.— (1-4)

If we momentarily detach the nonrestrictive clauses from both sentences, we have something that reads as “[m]usic / [v]ibrates in the memory.— / Odours / [l]ive within the sense they quicken— (1-4). By removing these relative clauses, it conveys an optimistic radiance on art as well as life. By keeping these relative clauses, Shelley allows the pessimistic glare on art as well as life to be present even if he dangles these negative images within an optimistic picture of one's mortality.

### **Internal and Terminal Punctuation**

For “music” like the “[o]dours” do not need to be reminisced or smelled upon only at a finite moment such as death. Certainly, we can appreciate the “music” and the “[o]dours” of such organic memories during continuous moments such as the inhabiting moment inhabiting moment since our memories would still “live within the sense they quicken,” as Greenblatt asserts, “quicken means to enliven” (820). We should also pay attention to how Shelley closes ends lines two and four, for the poet ends with terminal punctuation (i.e., the period). Still, the period follows the poet's internal punctuation (i.e., the dash). If we note, he does this in stanza two as well as embed his solo sentence with two more nonrestrictive relative clauses:

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,  
Are heaped for the beloved's bed—  
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,  
Love itself shall slumber on. (5-8)

Again, if we remove the relative clauses in our mind, then Shelley's lyric reads as “[r]ose leaves / [a]re heaped for the beloved's bed— / And so thy thoughts / [l]ove itself shall slumber on (5-8). However, the presence of the pessimistic glare is lurking once we allow the relative clauses to linger throughout the text.

### **Memory, Music, and Permanence – Oh, My!**

Conceivably, what our speaker is voicing is that music in the form of art, which can be created by humans or by Mother Nature or a Higher Power can still be cherished by the auditor, reader, or spectator even after the tune stops, the flora stops growing, or we, as mortals, halt breathing.

David Braun, in his “Permanence in Memory,” states, “[t]he odd number lines (1, 3, 5, and 7) show death and termination . . . while the even number lines (2, 4, 6, 8), show that these brief events live forever” (1). Now, Braun makes an appealing point for the even lines also end with a period then a dash, which means those optimistic moments in one’s life ever so pithy may for some time pause; nonetheless, the dash reminds us that our memories can transport us back to yesterday to remember a song, an image, a flower, or a person.

Speaking of a person, as the speaker mentions someone in the final lines of this poem, many critics believe that fellow Romantic poet and close friend, John Keats, may have inspired Shelley’s poem. Keats died of tuberculosis the same year Shelley penned this verse. In his November 29, 1821 letter to Joseph Severn – a friend of both Keats and Shelley – Shelley maintains,

In spite of his transcendent genius, Keats never was, nor ever will be, a popular poet; and the total neglect and obscurity in which the astonishing remnants of his mind still lie, was hardly to be dissipated by a writer who, however he may differ from Keats in more important qualities, at least resembles him in that accidental one, a want of popularity. (par. 2)

Paradoxically, the very same words could be heard as Shelley’s swan song in some ways since both he and Keats died quite young. Possibly, not with a great deal of pomp as both would have liked had they indeed known how admired they both were as poets.

Nevertheless, most artists do not know his or her importance while breathing, for it is after one’s last stroke of a brush, a pen, or last note is sung that one experiences a rebirth on our terrain while living in a space known as infinity or eternity, depending on how one approaches the afterlife. Still, the rose leaves that the speaker mentions in the last stanza, as Kandeler and Ullrich reveal, “are widely used even today as symbols of love and beauty” (30), Braun further connects the word “[l]ove” with the color red, which is closely linked to roses and with “life and vitality” (6). This relationship with the color makes sense if one reads this lyric as Shelley’s extra effort to keep Keats’ memory and work of art alive and vital for all generations.

### **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, Shelley did not realize this verse might be his lasting legacy for others to cherish his body of work, as our future quickly becomes our past in our memories as Shelley utterly expresses in his “Skylark” ode:

We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not:  
Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught;  
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.  
Yet, if we could scorn

Hate and pride and fear,  
If we were things born  
Not to shed a tear,  
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.  
Better than all measures  
Of delightful sound,  
Better than all treasures  
That in books are found,  
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!  
Teach me half the gladness  
That thy brain must know;  
Such harmonious madness  
From my lips would flow,  
The world should listen then, as I am listening now. (86-103)

Harold Bloom declares, “[To a Skylark] ends in sadness because it has not accounted for the joy that gives life to the skylark’s song” (48, 305). On the other hand, Shelley’s lyrical fragment ends with the hope that “[l]ove itself shall slumber on” with the memories that will at some point in time and space stay integral and transport us from our temporal horizon on Earth to our final horizon in Eternity.

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