
The Romanticism of Wordsworth and Shelley: a Poetry of the "Happiest Moments"

Wordsworth said that 'poetry is passion, it is the history or science of feeling'. In conjunction with Shelley's quote, this is a bold statement to make. Not only does Wordsworth name poetry as the 'science' of emotion –creating an authorial sense of logic –but also as the 'history' of feeling. This suggests that poetry has been able to 'record' every past emotion, whether elation or despair. This claim in itself implies that other modes of documentation, such as prose, are inadequate at recording such emotion. And Wordsworth takes this definition even further. Shelley claims that poetry is the 'record of the best and happiest moments', whereas Wordsworth asserts that 'poetry [is] passion'. Therefore, poetry is not only the act of a witness; reading and writing poetry creates these 'happiest moments'.

Shelley's opening quote maintains that poetry is a 'record', suggesting that the poet's choice of words merely translates sight to verse. However, Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' also argues the importance of the poet in creating such happy moments within a poem. It is only through their imagination that words are able to exalt a 'dull, dense world' from ephemeral humanity to an eternal, true beauty. This is continued as he quotes that poetry 'strips the veil of familiarity from the world'. It is important to consider this metaphor of the 'veil', as an image that blinds humanity from seeing an absolute beauty. The responsibility therefore lies with the poet, to unveil the world and bring its beauty in to focus. This metaphor is, however, further complicated. A veil is assumed to be partially transparent, suggesting that mankind is a mere whisper away from exultation. Furthermore, Shelley perhaps suggests the power of language in making all that is familiar, suddenly unfamiliar again. As people, we grow so used to our surroundings that we stop noticing them. In framing them in such a poetic way, there is hope that the world will be re-born in the eyes of humanity, and they will transcend from an ignorance of arts and consistent monotony. This perhaps suggests these poets place themselves, as the 'best minds', on a pedestal. They alone are privy to these captivating, idiosyncratic perspectives, and through poetry they are also allowing the masses a share of their elevated views. However, this exploration of Shelley's work is not wholly representative of the wider Romantic tradition. For example, Wordsworth, as a first generation Romantic poet, sees a beauty in the world that is not necessarily good, but still creates an impact upon his life. Therefore, Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' refuses to adhere to his own statement. Poetry is not merely recording these moments of happiness; it is only through the transcendent quality of verse that these very moments can appear so, and without it they would remain as bleak as reality.

Whilst Shelley focuses on the 'best and happiest moments', Wordsworth's *The Two-Part*

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Prelude recalls memories that whilst they are not wholly positive, still remain important in shaping his life. Yet, his poetry is not completely negative. Wordsworth often sees the potential for happiness, as if he is on a path that he knows will eventually lead to it. This concept is echoed throughout his poetry, displayed through the motif of a restorative nature. The world around Wordsworth is 'purifying [...] The elements of feeling and thought [...] both pain and fear, until we recognise/ A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.' For Wordsworth, poetry is not simply the 'record' of the happiest moments. In writing these verses, the beauty lies in his interaction with the world, going beyond a witness to a participant. He claims that Nature has the power to '[purify]' us, suggesting that it refuses to remain as simply a landscape to describe. Nature is instead personified to act as a deity-like figure, producing not only happy 'moments', but refining our senses so that it will influence our entire future. As previously mentioned, Wordsworth encourages a sense of expectation within his verses. We are currently accused of being impure in both 'feeling and thought', waiting to 'recognise' how sacred 'the beatings of the heart' actually are. Instead, humanity must rely upon the power of Nature to make us see how beautiful life can be, until we ourselves come to realise it. Additionally, the pronoun 'we' rejects Shelley's previously explored exclusivity. His poetry suggests that only poets can recognise such a 'grandeur', yet Wordsworth's verse is almost hopeful that someday all people will reach this elevated perspective. Furthermore, Shelley's quote defines poetry as recording the 'best and happiest moments', yet this is not wholly accurate with Wordsworth's *Two-Part Prelude*. He refuses to discount other emotions, such as 'pain and fear', suggesting that these are as important in shaping the 'best minds'. In feeling such negativity, the subsequent exultation to 'grandeur' will seem only more intense; the further one falls, the more they have to rise. Wordsworth sees a potential to reach a form of happiness, a 'grandeur' that suggests a hope for future greatness. Therefore, Wordsworth's poetry is less a 'record' of happiness, and more a hope for future joy and inspiration.

Shelley's given quote focuses predominantly on happiness. Yet, conversely, he limits these emotions to mere 'moments'. In Wordsworth's other works, such as *Tintern Abbey*, he adheres closely to the Romantic tradition, using nature as a backdrop to this significant theme of time. Instead of these 'moments' existing in only the present, Wordsworth uses this idea of memory to suggest that happiness from the past can also influence a present epiphany. Thereby it is possible that the world need not be consistently glorious, if these 'best moments' can be accessed always through images in the mind. This would also mean that the poet has control upon when he feels this elation; as opposed to spontaneous emotion, one can choose a memory and thus it's accompanying feelings. Wordsworth explores how memories are not only restorative, but sometimes also imperative:

These forms of beauty [...] I

Have owed to them

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In hours of weariness sensations sweet

Felt in the blood

Despite a certain control in returning to these memories, the verb 'owed' implies an unpaid debt; the narrator relies heavily upon his past happiness in an attempt to rid him of current darkness. Without this 'beauty' to express through poetry, his imagination would be bereft, the world bleak and a poet's mind unable to create such verses. Additionally, the ambiguous language: 'forms of beauty' gives poetry universality among other arts, suggesting that poetry is not exclusive in being able to record the happiest moments of humanity. And these 'moments' seem bittersweet; they are only possible through paying a debt of 'hours of weariness'. To contrast this bleak image, the sibilance of 'sensations sweet' creates a lilting gaiety, as if this lift in syntax is synonymous to a moment of happiness itself. Each emotion felt, whether positive or negative, is intensified by an atmosphere that is almost carnal. Everything is 'felt in the blood'; emotion is no longer a construct, but something that is felt physically. This is echoed in the structure, with the rhythmic iambic pentameter echoing the pulse of blood entering and leaving the heart. This reflects again a sense of dependency and debt. For a human to physically function and pump blood around a body, they require this poetic inspiration from nature. Therefore, *Tintern Abbey* offers a surprisingly bleak outlook on Shelley's statement. These 'happiest moments' are not only terribly fleeting, but they exist only in memories based on the past. It is perhaps a necessity, then, that poetry records these moments, for without them we would be lost.

Thus far, the influence of these 'happiest moments' has been examined. Yet, we must also consider a greater responsibility that is placed upon the poet. If he is indeed, as advocated by Shelley, one of few who are able to unveil humanity to the world's beauty, his work becomes almost that of a samaritan. Consequently, this suggests that poetry cannot merely be a record of these joyful moments. It is only through a poet's words that beauty can arise, and these moments seem their 'happiest'. To conclude, seeing the 'best and happiest moments' is dependent on having the 'best mind', seemingly a poet's according to Shelley. Without it, one is merely a human living under a 'veil'.

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