

Research Paper

Open Access

Romanticism and the Ethics of Aesthetic Suffering: A Study of Shelley's Compassionate Imagination

Dr. Afroza Banu¹ & Dr. Md. Shahidul Islam²

¹Dr. Afroza Banu, Associate Professor, Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia,

Email: afrozaiu83@gmail.com

²Dr. Md. Shahidul Islam, Associate Professor, Department of English, Lalon University of Science and Arts, Kushtia-7000, Email: shahidphd92@gmail.com

Citation (APA): Banu, A. & Islam, M. S., (2024). Romanticism and the Ethics of Aesthetic Suffering: A Study of Shelley's Compassionate Imagination. *International Journal of Humanities Arts and Business (IJHAB)*. Vol-2, Issue-3. Available at www.ijhab.com.

Abstract

This study applied a qualitative approach to understand Romanticism, aesthetics, and ethics, and it was conducted based on a detailed examination of the work of poetic imagination by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the ways of how Shelley represents human sufferings as the location of moral action. This was the main thing that aimed at exploring the manner in which Shelley uses compassionate imagination to turn pain and suffering into an ethically sensitized aesthetic moment that enables readers to encounter and understand the human condition. Based on intimate textual interpretation of some of the poems like Alastor, Julian and Maddalo, and the Cenci, the paper integrated theoretical building blocks of Romantic aestheticism and ethical criticism especially those made by Martha Nussbaum and Elaine Scarry. Data sources were poetry and prose by Shelley, critical essays and the secondary literature related to them. The information was interpreted in terms of themes of wastes of imagination, conscience and aesthetic portrayal of suffering. It is indicated that the poetic imagination of Shelley does not only romanticize suffering but also reworks it as a means of moral awakening, as an imaginative greatness that, according to the findings, appeals to ethical responsiveness on the part of the poet himself and the reader. The paper has been able to relate to an under-saturated field of Shelley scholarship because it makes ethical suffering the primary point of focus, or, in other words, it provides novel contributions to the study of ethical aspects of Romantic texts.

Keywords: Romanticism, Aesthetic Suffering, Compassionate Imagination, Ethical Engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Romantic age was a turning point in the literary field that focuses on emotion, individualism and the sublime to the Enlightenment rationality and the industrial modernity. Experiment with suffering was one of the primary issues of the Romantic literature not as a casual pathology or inner despair, but as the paramount source of philosophical, aesthetic or moral investigation. Percy Bysshe Shelley is one of the most important representatives of the English Romanticism who is outstanding by the fact that he is able to combine the elements of the imaginative and ethical awareness mainly through his depiction of pain. Not only did his poetic vision aestheticize pain, but also made it an ethical experience, which enclosed the readers into the sphere of acts of compassion toward the sufferers of others. The role of aesthetics in moral life the distance between Shelley and Keats suggests the need to rethink. Nevertheless, although much has been written about Shelley over the last two centuries, not many efforts have been made to analyze the moral side of his aesthetic vision, especially concerning the issue of suffering. His political radicalism or the philosophical metaphysical ideal has become the main thrust of his critics in viewing the moral intent of pain about what his artistic depiction was meant to convey (Curran, 1980; O'Neill, 1993). This is one of the gaps, attributable to the necessity to examine the extent to which the poetic imagination of Shelley is used as the tool of ethical engagement. Both *Julian and Maddalo* and *the Cenci*, as well as *Alastor* are the works in which Shelley manages to use the imagination not only as the pledge of suffering presentation, but of generating a stronger feeling of sympathy and moral obligation in the audience.

The issue which is the focus of the current research is the apparent lack of justice in the ethical theory when it comes to the discourse on Shelley and their treatment of the aesthetic suffering. Although writers such as Nussbaum (1990) and Scarry (1985) have enlightened the manner in which literature can arrive at an ethical representation of pain, these models have not been used sparingly with regard to works of Shelley. It is an oversight which curtails our knowledge of the larger moral implications of Romantic aesthetics and the transformative effects of the imagination in the poetic practice of Shelley. The importance of this study is that it adds to the scholarship in the study of Romanticism by providing a subtle moral reading of the work by Shelley. Placing Shelley into the context of the general argument about moral philosophy and aesthetics in literary works, it becomes possible to realize the correspondence between his compassionate imagination and the ability to provide a special kind of ethical experience with his work. This is one way to make our experience of Shelley the artist richer, and it is also one way of increasing our understanding of the ethical possibilities of literature to redeem suffering and provoke a humane response to it in its readers and hearers.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

This paper set out to explore how Shelley is able to adopt an ethical act of aestheticizing human suffering in his compassionate imagination since poetry written by the Romantic poets was a mode of her moral response in the human affairs.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The developed critical literature on Percy Bysshe Shelley has been majorly discussing his radical politics, his metaphysical idealism, and his poetical experiments without giving much importance to his ethical thought in his imaginative descriptions about human sufferings. Nevertheless, a number of recent and pioneering studies contain valuable information that the present research is based on. Curran (1980) provides an in-depth exploration of *The Cenci*, where Challenging the tyranny and injustices has been the rationale presented by Shelley in this play. Although Curran addresses such themes as suffering, he interprets them more political and psychological rather than focusing on their ethical-

aesthetical outcomes. O'Neill (1993) sets the works of Shelley in a literary-biographical scenario in which he has studied his political visionary act and idealism given his personal experiences. In his discussion, he does not enquire how Shelley treats the human suffering with sympathy but he has accepted the fact that Shelley is sympathetic to the human suffering. Literature contributes to moral growth, Nussbaum (1990) contends, literature requires the reader to be part of the lives of other people and this results in empathy and sensitivity to moral issues. Nussbaum does not pay special attention to Shelley, but her theory can offer an excellent perspective on a way one can analyze how poetic descriptions of suffering in Shelley can appeal morally to a reader.

In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry (1985) considers how it is possible to exhibit pain and how it can go through ethical imagination. Her observations about the aesthetic value of pain contribute to the knowledge about how Shelley tries to put the shape and significance to pain in poetry in this study. In *The Circle of Our Vision* (1996) Pite has explored the way Wordsworth and Coleridge treated suffering by Romantic poets. Though Shelley is stopped at briefly, the research ignores the ethical potential that may be recognized in his imaginative vision. By Cian Duffy (2005) in *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*, Shelley is seen to use the sublime as a form that attacks political oppression. Duffy focuses on affect and imagination, but she does not concentrate on the ethical aspects of aesthetic suffering in the work of Shelley very much. In *The Poetics of Spice* and subsequent publications on eco-criticism Timothy Morton (2006) poses the idea of the enigmatic force of dark ecology, which questions classical approaches to Romanticism. Even without any emphasis on suffering, Morton, in her framework, points out the ethical disorientation that aesthetic experiences may attract, which is one of the moments that concern Shelley in her disturbingly articulated pain images.

This association between Romanticism and moral philosophy is made by James Chandler (1998), who approaches the issue of Romanticism in literature in finding means of ethical introspection. The author talks about Shelley within the context of this philosophical turn, though not aesthetically focused. The Shelley Gothic elements are again visited especially in *The Cenci* by Jerrold E. Hogle (2015), in which aesthetic horror can be seen to play a role in shaking the moral complacency of the readers. The given approach leaves the ground for future investigations of the ethical worth of such disturbing aesthetic experiences. Tilottama Rajan (2010) deals with the epistemological and ethical implications of Romantic poetics and the manner in which the Romantic writers raise questions in these spheres by means of form. The role of Shelley in this philosophical interrogation and particularly in pieces such as *Alastor* draws little attention but fails to give due focus on the subject of suffering as a moral theme. The Mask of Anarchy and political interpretations *In Masks of Anarchy*, Michael Demson (2013) finds a political interpretation of Shelley, of the verse in particular, but more so of *The Mask of Anarchy*, focusing on motifs of protests and injustices. This treatment, though ethically important, still can be based on political philosophy, but not on moral.

Though the literature discussed above is of great value to the understanding of Shelley, his political imagination, his aesthetical approaches, and his Romantic ideals, there are very little researches done to analyze how happenings perpetrated by Shelley helps in creating a moral and aesthetic system. Suffering is often discussed as a metaphor of politics or the psychological outcome and not in the depth of its ethical positioning as an aesthetically loaded morally laden experience. Moreover, though the critical instruments of other theorists like Nussbaum and Scarry have much to say about the ethics of literature, such abstractions have been employed in little hindered articulation toward Shelley poetics. Scholarly discussion with this particular way of dealing with Shelley and his ways of evoking the

compassionate imagination in the process of writing as the process of ethical engagement is dealing through the aestheticization of suffering and pain is a notable gap. The study addresses that gap by re-conceptualizing the major poetic texts in Shelley under ethical criticism and therefore reading his literature artistry as being instructor of value as well as creativity.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

This study adopted qualitative, interpretive and analytical approaches with thematic analysis of the text as the method of doing it to capture how Percy Bysshe Shelley perceives suffering as a morally aesthetic phenomenon. This study tried to look into the compassionate imagination of Shelley in a way that incorporates contextual thinking, through a few chosen poetic texts. The main sources were Shelley *Alastor* (1816), *Julian and Maddalo* (1819), and *The Cenci* (1819) because they explored the issues of suffering, imagination, and narratives of moralities most deeply. The theoretical foundation of Shelley, especially of his aesthetic and ethical philosophy, was rooted in prose works by Shelley, in particular *A Defence of Poetry*. Secondary sources were books, articles and essays about Romanticism, aesthetic theory and ethical criticism with major theoretical contributions by Martha Nussbaum (1990) and Elaine Scarry (1985), and critics like Curran (1980), O'Neill (1993) and Duffy (2005). The process of data collection entailed a tight textual selection and marking with the help of the suffering, compassion and aesthetic transformation themes. Critical materials were bogged down under the literary databases like JSTOR and Project MUSE and supplemented with Shelley's letters and essays. Close reading analysis of data under the theme was dependent upon themes of ethical representation of suffering, the imagination's role in the moral attention, or transformation of pain into artwork. This study used ethical approach of literary criticism as the theoretical guide to conduct research and viewed literature as a form of moral exploration with the Romantic aesthetics enriching the subject of study. By promoting active work with different texts and critical approaches, the validity of the research was achieved, whereas the sense and openness of the interpretation strategies confirmed its academic credibility.

V. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

This study shows that poetic imagination of Percy Bysshe Shelley does not aim at aestheticization of human suffering to make it look beautiful and romantic but in order to make the reader morally and intellectually interested in empathy, soul-searching, and moral enlightenment. Based on close readings of *Alastor* (1816), *Julian and Maddalo* (1819), and *The Cenci* (1819), the discussion shows how Shelley can convert suffering into a set of deeper ethical experience through joining imaginative sympathy with the moral call to action. In *Alastor*, Shelley brings to life a lonely poet who is in search of perfect beauty and divine knowledge and he meets existential loneliness. Suffering of the speaker is not necessarily shown as tragic, but morally important. On lines 514-518, Shelley says:

"He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude. / Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes, / And virgins, as unknown he passed, have sighed / And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes" (*Alastor*, lines 514-518).

In this case, Shelley combines the concept of beauty with loss, creating the image of the misconstrued artiste whose pain becomes a reflection to the other people. The phrase strangers wept indicates the ethical strength of aesthetics to express emotions and arouse empathy. This can be matched with that put forward by Nussbaum (1990) that through literature, we are exposed to the moral sensitivity that comes with living in others:

"Compassion involves the recognition of another's humanity, their pain, and their worth" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 31).

The process of fate of the poet in *Alastor* does not only invite sympathy, but ponders on the expense of lacking in contact with the rest of civilization aesthetic idealism. In *Julian and Maddalo* ethos of imagination is dialogical and self-reflective. The main dialogue between Julian (usually interpreted as Shelley) and Maddalo (based on Byron) ends in the meeting with the Maniac, the figure of psychically devastation. The Maniac states in lines 526 529:

“I curse my own weak heart for ever / Suffering what it created. I implore / The heavens to torture me, for I am worse / Than misery itself” (*Julian and Maddalo*, lines 526–529).

Such an utterance, of self-generated hell, echoes the opinion of Elaine Scarry (1985) regarding the fact that:

“Physical and emotional pain actively destroys language and meaning, yet cries for recognition” (Scarry, 1985, p. 4).

To reify the anguish of the Maniac is no way to take away its horror and only increases the call to action on ethical stakes. As readers we are attracted towards the lyricism but compelled into the real world of moral ethical psychological suffering. This participation weakens what Scarry calls the inexpressibility of pain, and it moves readers towards the sympathetic anguish. In *The Cenci*, the way Shelley writes about suffering is more indecisive, ethical in its depths, dealing with the issue of institutional violence as well as the nature of patriarchy and their interrelationship. In Act III, scene I, Beatrice, the tragic heroine speaks out on her sufferings and moral ability:

“I have endured all, and I suffer more / Than I can suffer; and I will not live / To be the scorn of my own slaves” (*The Cenci*, Act III, Scene I).

Such scene of pain and stand-up appeals to the viewers into a dilemma of morality. According to Jerrold Hogle (2015), the phrase and its variants can also be seen as a quote or a group of quotations:

“Shelley uses Gothic horror not merely to terrify but to provoke moral introspection” (Hogle, 2015, p. 214).

The actions that Beatrice takes on her course to revenge are challenging century-old conceptions of heroism and compel us to pose the question: Is there any moral principle behind the justification of suffering through highly unethical actions? Imagination in the vision of Shelley is transformative as well as moral. Shelley (in *A Defence of Poetry*) also makes the famous argument:

“A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another... The great instrument of moral good is the imagination” (Shelley, 1840/2004, p. 533).

This philosophical stand is also the basis of the aesthetic presentation of suffering given by the poet: the imagination is the moral means of contact between the self and the other. This point is similar to the idea expressed by Nussbaum (1990) according to which:

“The narrative imagination is an essential tool in moral education. It makes us recognize and feel the pain of others” (p. 95).

Shelley's poems function rather as ethical exercise grounds to the reader, calling forth not sympathy but identification with, and moral sympathy towards, the victim. In addition in *Julian and Maddalo*, Julian looks at the Maniac with a back that is quiet and unresolvable:

“He seemed, as in his subtle mind / Some tone had struck that could not pass away” (*Julian and Maddalo*, lines 580–581).

The poetic event shows that suffering stays and keeps marking the consciousness despite the pain gone by. In Shelley, a domain is achieved a moral memory after narrative

termination. In *The Cenci* the opposition of Beatrice is also resonated through her freezing but ethically titillating declaration:

“I will rise / Like a strong exhalation in the evening / And wrap the world in darkness till it feels / My power and shame” (*The Cenci*, Act IV, Scene I).

This statement makes Beatrice not only a victim, but more importantly an opponent of retribution. The gothic style, presented by Shelley, compels the readers to see the ethical confusion and state injustice. Shelley is equally concerned with emotional truth since this is a Romantic ideal that informs his poetic strategy. In *Alastor*, this gloomy vision emerges in these last lines:

“He died / And no one knew” (*Alastor*, lines 718–719).

These lines address the actual unseeingness of suffering and moral defeat of a society that cannot see into the lives of others. In the end Shelley is not alone in her vision. In *Julian and Maddalo*, Julian speaks of a guarded hope:

“We might be otherwise—we might be all / We dream of happy beings” (*Julian and Maddalo*, lines 630–631).

In this instance, Shelley suggests the moral change that it is possible to turn back to the moral potential of the humanity, as it can be reached with the aid of imagination and compassion. The results of this investigation confirm that the compassionate imagination of Shelley redefines the suffering as a morally aesthetic experience. Shelley makes readers look beyond pain and treat it ethically using vivid words and well-rounded characters. While his poetry maintains that the conflict between beauty and suffering is not antithetical, but morally productive. All this, Shelley demonstrates, imagination is not an escape into pleasure, but a step out of pain, into the moral feeling.

VI. DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

This study presents a very valuable contribution to the academic community studying Percy Bysshe Shelley, as it brings into the foreground the ethical aspect of his intellectual and imaginative exploration of human suffering, an element only briefly elaborated in most of the extant literature on the topic of Shelley. Although earlier metacritics like Curran (1980), O'Neill (1993) have highlighted both the radical politics and visionary idealism of Shelley, the aspects of suffering which they articulate shape the suffering within the political or psychological registers without giving a full account of its moral-aesthetic overtones. This study will address this important gap because it shows that when tragedy is poetically aestheticized by Shelley, it avoids romanticizing suffering but stretches the reader towards the end of cogitation and empathetic sympathy. These results support the theory by Martha Nussbaum (1990) concerning the role of literature as a teacher of morals, because, through a narrative imagination, literature evokes empathetic feelings. One of the brightest examples of this mechanism is Shelley *Alastor*: the fate of the isolated poet causes the reader to realize the moral burden of alienation and the price of idealism. This same statement by Nussbaum is supported by Shelley as in the lines, “Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes” (*Alastor*, 514–518). Shelley writes that the poetic form led to the growth of moral sensitivity that is found in some people, but goes beyond emotional sympathy.

In the same manner, the analysis of both *Julian and Maddalo* in this paper is relevant to the views of Elaine Scarry (1985) on the inexpressibility of pain and the impossibility of describing suffering with the help of words. Self-torment of the Maniac (I curse my own weak heart forever... lines 526–529) reflects that Scarry postulates that pain wipes out language and meaning as it calls out to be understood (Scarry, 1985, p. 4). By aestheticizing here, Shelley does not neutralize horror, but intensifies some ethical imperative that compels the readers into the state of compassionate queasiness an interpretive gesture, which has not been fully considered in the past representations, as the analysis of the aestheticization of

horror can be observed in both Pite (1996) and Duffy (2005) where the affect or political sublimity has been prioritized but the ethical imperative of the sufferings was not fully elaborated. The moral dimensions of suffering are further developed in *The Cenci*, where the Gothic horror to which Shelley resorted carries the moral implication, which agrees with Jerrold Hogle (2015) claiming aesthetic horror to be disturbing and causing moral reflection due to its unsettling nature. Beatrice is a victim of an unwarranted resistance (I have endured all...), Beatrice is committed to proving that being a victim is a painful thing that one cannot remain a victim. This is a more subtle representation than that achieved by Curran (1980) who tends towards a political analysis and Rajan (2010) who is more epistemologically minded and explains the purpose of suffering as a driver of ethical agency through poetry in Shelley.

Besides, the analysis of the poem locates the aesthetic and ethical philosophy of Shelley in the context of the *A Defence of Poetry*, which strengthens the argument by the poet that “imagination is the great instrument of moral good” (Shelley, 1840/2004, p. 533). This agrees with Nussbaum (1990) who conceptualized narrative imagination as a vital ethical instrument, and Chandler (1998) who considered Romantic literature to be one of the sources of ethical self-manifestation. Nevertheless, the paper is a unique study of how Shelley takes suffering and makes it generative in ethical and aesthetic terms without following the route of making it a political metaphor or mental condition. Although experiencing suffering is not precisely what Timothy Morton (2006) addresses in his idea of a dark ecology, the comparison proves to be valuable, helping to demonstrate how certain aesthetic experiences can result in the ethical disorientation, which can be found in the problematic yet ethically charged descriptions of pain Shelley offers, which leaves the impression and discomfort on the reader and is hardly soothing with its simplicity. This article develops the schema of disorientation and moral awakening, as provided by Morton in her article, by demonstrating how Shelley finds connection between disorientation and moral awakening using compassionate imagination.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study addresses another important gap, in that it explicates Shelley compassionate imagination as an ethical response. It proves how poetic lamentation is not escapist or aesthetizing at the most purely formal level but it opens the reader to deeper moral reflection and solidarity with the sufferer situated by Shelley in the category of the universal. The treated position of Shelley between Romantic aesthetics and ethical thought can be located through the principle of cross-reference between the thought of fundamental critics in relation to the works of Shelley to integrated ethical literary theorists, thereby inaugurating new avenues of valuing his poetic contribution to the ethics of suffering.

REFERENCES

- Chandler, J. (1998). *England in 1819: The politics of literary culture and the case of Romantic historicism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Curran, S. (1980). *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions ringed with fire*. Princeton University Press.
- Demson, M. (2013). *Masks of Anarchy: The poetic radicalism of Shelley and El Desdichado*. Pluto Press.
- Duffy, C. (2005). *Shelley and the revolutionary sublime*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hogle, J. E. (2015). *Shelley's Gothic*. In T. O'Neill & M. Sandy (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Percy Bysshe Shelley* (pp. 203–217). Cambridge University Press.
- Hogle, J. E. (2015). *The gothic and the romantic*. Blackwell Companion to Romanticism.
- Morton, T. (2006). *The poetics of spice: Romantic consumerism and the exotic*. Cambridge University Press.

- Nussbaum, M. C. (1990). *Love's knowledge: Essays on philosophy and literature*. Oxford University Press.
- O'Neill, M. (1993). *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A literary life*. Macmillan.
- Pite, R. (1996). *The circle of our vision: Dante's presence in English Romantic poetry*. Oxford University Press.
- Rajan, T. (2010). *Romantic narrative: Shelley, Hays, Godwin, Wollstonecraft*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Scarry, E. (1985). *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*. Oxford University Press.
- Shelley, P. B. (2004). *A Defence of Poetry*. In Z. Leader & M. O'Neill (Eds.), *The Major Works* (pp. 509–535). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1840)
- Shelley, P. B. (2004). *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*. In Z. Leader & M. O'Neill (Eds.), *The Major Works* (pp. 90–106). Oxford University Press.
- Shelley, P. B. (2004). *Julian and Maddalo*. In Z. Leader & M. O'Neill (Eds.), *The Major Works* (pp. 229–239). Oxford University Press.
- Shelley, P. B. (2004). *The Cenci*. In Z. Leader & M. O'Neill (Eds.), *The Major Works* (pp. 143–192). Oxford University Press.

