

# Thoughts on T. S. Eliot's "Shelley and Keats"

*Ferrick Gray*

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I am a great admirer of Mr. Eliot's work (Eliot from now on), both poetry, prose and critical essays. Albeit I do not find the enthusiasm for Wordsworth as he does, or at least to me appears to have, I hold great interest in work. I do find his comments about Shelley (which I doubt to be flippant) quite amusing on occasions. Nevertheless, there is some truth in what he has to say about Shelley; the man and his poetry.

Shelley is mostly associated with two other poets, Keats and Byron. What is it with Keats? Shelley enjoyed Keats' poetry. He drowned with a copy of Keats' work in his coat pocket. Perhaps it is that they are both buried in Rome, the Testaccio area of Rome in the non-Catholic section. Anyway, both were far from England, away from all their problems and torments.

Byron? Well Byron disliked little Johnny a great deal. But Byron liked Shelley or at least the women that followed Shelley around. Byron was much the entertainer and philanthropist of sorts. What did it matter whether Byron liked Shelley or Claire or if Shelley liked Byron?

Byron strikes me as too self-centered to be concerned with Shelley, but his generosity would have been appreciated at the time. If someone so flamboyant and famous (or infamous) liked you, what did it matter?

Some, maybe a few, possibly many, have difficulty separating the poet from their poetry. Ezra Pound was another in this same position and suffered greatly for it. Not all that you read about Shelley is necessarily true, but what Eliot has given us here has been documented by others.

There comes the time for a few poets where their brilliance is overshadowed by their personality, actions and beliefs. As a result, certain of these factors become a stumbling block for readers in any attempt to appreciate their poetry.

Eliot's dislike for Shelley and his poetry is understandable. I freely admit that it has only been recently that I can read his work and enjoy it rather than becoming bored with it. Shelley's choice of words is stunning and at times beyond belief, but it can also be overwhelming. Examples are *The Sensitive Plant* and *The Revolt of Islam*. In the latter, I am not convinced that the use of Spenserian stanzas worked so well. Some come as very broken to suit the rime and others in the later cantos rather repetitious and uninspiring.

Our dear Shelley was indeed an odd young man who was prone to flights of fancy. Eliot's not so flattering opinion of Shelley as a person is not unexpected:

"And the biographical interest which Shelley has always excited makes it difficult to read the poetry without remembering the man: and the man was humourless, pedantic, self-centred, and sometimes almost a blackguard. Except for an occasional flash of shrewd sense, when he is speaking of someone else and not concerned with his own affairs or with fine writing, his letters were insufferably dull."<sup>[1]</sup>

Shelley's beliefs can be difficult to come to terms with. Maybe not so much in the 21st century, but at the time of his writing and in the 20th century, his beliefs were not taken as the norm which accounts for why Shelley did not come into his own in the time of his writing. Mary Shelley's editing of his work may have made some of his work more palatable, but the stigma of the man was still prevalent. History has a way of defining some people which can make them less tolerable to others, or than others.

Shelley's work could be very up and down in terms of quality within a single poem. However, this is not uncommon when writing lengthy poems. At times it is very easy to get carried away and all of a sudden you have lost track of your initial train of thought. It was more obvious with Shelley because his language was very, let's say, highfalutin, and he would become very descriptive with trivial aspects but leave other areas wanting.

We need to remember that Shelley was a young man when he died and as Eliot points out, his great unfinished work, *The Triumph of Life* shows a maturing Shelley in better writing and greater wisdom. There is precision in imaging and the economy of words.<sup>[2]</sup> Perhaps we are seeing the *phanopoeia* and *melopoeia* coming into play. It would have been interesting to see how both he and his poetry would have developed had he lived longer.

Eliot has a lot to say about Shelley's poetry which some would themselves find offensive and definitely would not like the same or similar said about them. But

he is stating some of what *he* (Eliot) finds difficult to understand and so making it difficult to enjoy Shelley's poetry. There is no doubt whatsoever that we have similar thoughts and feelings about other poets and it can well be the poet themselves, personality whatever that is the major dislike, or at least the influence.

I will not say that Eliot is saying that Shelley is or was not a great poet, but Shelley's poetry is indeed not for everyone, purely because of his beliefs and over-developed ideas.

Eliot does not have much to say about Keats in comparison with what he has said about Shelley. Keats to me, was apt to be a bit of a try-hard. That is perhaps a bit harsh, but with regards to his *Hyperion*, I am in agreement. There are great lines, but I would not say the poem itself is great.<sup>[3]</sup> I know that Keats had a strong interest in Greek mythology, but I think he too fell short of the interest in *Hyperion* and tossed it aside, His reboot so to speak, of *The Fall of Hyperion*, I do not believe did him any better. Unfortunately he was unable to finish it.

I do think that the criticism that Keats was awarded was harsh, maybe a man not of his times. Byron was unrelenting and Wordsworth not much better. Keats was young, a gentle man but I do wonder about his motives. Nevertheless, some of his work is immortal, saying that it could never be repeated by anyone else. Keats wrote some amazing and inspirational poetry considering his age. I do think modern followers take more pity in that he died young. A great poet does not need sympathy.

It would seem that I too have written less about Keats, but this corresponds to the essay I am referring to. I think that a lot of Keats' faults were derived more from his immaturity. He hoped for greater things which he eventually achieved. But we have to wonder about the self-centeredness of the inscription: "*Here lies one whose name was writ in water.*" What does that really mean? What is he telling us?

It is almost saying his greatness will never be known. How many of us would like to be remembered for what we tried to achieve? Was it because of criticism or because what he wrote he genuinely thought was great work? Indeed he suffered harsh times, but this is a little pleading albeit somewhat romantic in sentiment. But is it also in anger and disappointment? Keats could have done well enough to cement his reputation with his shorter work like his odes<sup>[4]</sup> but it would seem that ego has played the greater part.

Whereas it did appear that Shelley had other motives behind his use of poetry, Keats did not. Keats merely puts it out there but unfortunately with greater expectations than what was received. Perhaps some boyhood fantasy or in love with a young girl who does not reciprocate in any fashion. Would this have added to his already tormented life?

His fascination with death cannot go without notice, and he was well aware of his mortality. I suppose there comes a point when and where we are all aware, and mostly it is too late. What would we have done if we were in Shelley's or Keats' shoes?

*Greatness cannot be expected!*

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1. Eliot, Thomas 1933 *The Use of Poetry & the Use of Criticism, Shelley and Keats*, p89 ↩
2. *ibid.* p90 ↩
3. *ibid.* p100 ↩
4. *ibid.* p100 ↩