



**Becoming God: Romantic Notions of Morality in Shelley's *Hymn of Apollo* and  
*Hymn of Pan***

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**Abstract**

The short poems *Hymn of Apollo* and *Hymn of Pan* were written by Percy B. Shelley in 1820. The two poems reveal Shelley's romantic conception of an ideal society in which morality was reinterpreted from an atheistic perspective, using Greek gods as role models. This article explores the paradoxes in Shelley's philosophical thinking on good and evil.

**Keywords** Apollo, reality, order, rebellion

The *Hymn of Apollo* and its sister piece *Hymn of Pan* are two short poems contributed by Shelley for his wife Mary Shelley's poetic play *Midas*. Mary Shelley's creation of the play reflects Shelley's deep interest in Latin and Greek culture (Reiman, 1992: ii). Some scholars believe that the play *Midas* also illustrates Mary Shelley's reverence for nature (Fisch, 1993: 124). Both the hymns, along with *Prometheus Unbound*, *To the Skylark*, *Ode to the West Wind*, were authored in 1820, the very year in which Percy Shelley encouraged his wife to write as a way to overcome her grief at the loss of their newborn daughter (in 1818) and their son (in 1819). For Mary, the purpose of both *Midas* and another earlier piece *Proserpine*, was to teach children moral lessons, urging

them not to be “arrogant, selfish, or rebellious” (Koszul, 1922: 89). King Midas was a mythical Greek character who achieved the ability to make everything he touched turn into gold. After discovering the disadvantage of this ability, Midas started loving “green grass, the sky, trees, and flowers” and found a truly “rich, happy, free, and great” place (Koszul, 1922: 89). When Mary Shelley published the two short poems after her husband’s death in 1824, they were titled *Hymn of Apollo* and *Hymn of Pan*.

In this paper, I will discuss Shelley’s depiction of the two gods, Apollo and Pan, as rivals and representatives of two different personalities, and how they represent the morality that Shelley developed based on his reflections on ancient Greek culture. Here, I build the argument that Shelly thought of Apollo as an ideal model of the natural ruler, in which the ruler governs supremely based on the law of nature. As the god of the sun, Apollo gives life and governs everything. Pan, on the other hand, represents destruction and breakdown of order. Morality can thus be measured as the opposition between creative and destructive power, where Apollo is the life-giving sun and Pan is the contender. Not coincidentally, Apollo was the main character in the first of Shelley’s two hymns.

The two poems tell the story of a musical competition between Apollo, the sun god, and Pan, the god of the forest. Apollo plays his harp, while Pan plays the reed flute. Tmolus, the god of the mountains, judges that Apollo’s performance is “full of wisdom, beauty, and the power province of highest poetry lives with thy strain”, and Apollo the “king of melody”, thus names Apollo the winner of the competition. Pan believes that Tmolus’ judgment was based on utilitarian principles – as Apollo could melt snow and bring vitality to the earth. Instead, Pan considers Midas, who is also there, as more impartial and asks Midas for his opinion. Being a friend of Pan, Midas says that Apollo’s performance made people drowsy, while Pan’s music was full of joy, so he judged Pan’s music to be superior. Apollo angrily turns Midas’ ears into donkey ears.

British Romantic poets were obsessed with Greek mythology, and regarded Apollo as the god with “most Greek spirit” (Mueller, 1989: 2). According to Mueller, “The sun is the creator of humanity and the great father of all things”. In charge of light and youth, Apollo was handsome and dignified, and had a great and noble personality (Winkelmann, 2022: 126-128). Apollo predicted the future on behalf of Zeus, thus symbolizing authority, rationality, and morality. He was the Almighty God in Greek mythology.

The essence of the Romantic movement was to liberate humanity from the “constraints of social customs and morality [...] to encourage a new self that indulges in lawlessness, making it impossible for social collaboration to exist, thus making them face the choice of anarchy or dictatorship” (Russell, 1982: 224). Newton’s universe existed in an orderly manner, with planets

orbiting the sun in accordance with established orbits, achieving a symbol of the fixed imagination of virtuous politics (Russell, 1982: 213).

Most Romantic protagonists detest the commercialized, dehumanized, and standardized world, love nature, and view it as a living spirit, in harmony with human love and compassion. Harmony with nature is the source of truth and goodness. Shelley, along with Byron, is a typical Romantic poet, whose works strongly critiques social and political injustice and argues for the struggle for freedom. (Hao, 2015: 207)

The maintenance of order and pursuit of hierarchy was perceived by British 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic poets as manifestations of Greek rationality, form, and transcendent spirit. According to Romantic poets, if reason still exists, its manifestation must be clothed in a mythological cloak” (Russell, 1982: 221). In “The Prelude of the Greek Ode”, Shelley claimed that “we (Westerners) are all Greeks” (Brandeis, 1997: 300).

#### **Apollo: The ideal representer of order, justice, rationality, goodness, and beauty**

Apollo was the Greek god of the sun. The Sun has been worshipped since ancient times. The sun is often associated with order (ruling the transition between day and night), justice, punishment of evil and promotion of good, bringing warmth and light to the world. The ancient Egyptians believed that the sun god Ra brought light to the world and could see the right and wrong in the world. (Mueller, 1989: 187) The sun god “envies evil as an enemy”. To the Inca Empire and the ancient Mexicans, the sun god’s initial justice was concentrated on punishing evil deeds and doing good to others (Gao Fujin, 2002: 2). According to the Native American Pueblo people, “If we do evil, we are afraid that the sun god will punish us now or at some point in the future” (Morgan, 1985: 64). The sun god is the “supreme moral model, benevolence, wisdom, and immortality” (ibid.: 166). Around the world, the sun god is associated with light and wisdom, strict hierarchical systems and ethical norms.

The sun god Apollo in ancient Greek mythology was one of the twelve main gods in ancient Greek mythology and the son of Zeus and Leto. Apollo was originally named “Phoebus”, meaning “light” or “radiance”. He was the source of light and heat. In Homer’s epics “Iliad” and “Odyssey”, Apollo was described as the “far-shooter”. The first three volumes of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* deal mainly with Apollo’s deeds and actions. According to the rulers of Delphi, Kralos, Tenedos, and Patara, Apollo ordered the future, past, and present, as the “strings and songs” could not be harmonious without him; people thus called him the “savior” (Ovid, 2007: 15). Apollo could play musical instruments, and because the heat of the sun helps people recover from diseases, he also had healing powers. Around the fifth century BCE, he succeeded Helios as the sun god.

Shelley's *Hymn of Apollo* consists of six stanzas 36 lines, in a ABABCC rhyme. The powerful language, beautiful imagery, and metaphorical techniques sing praises of brightness, expressing Shelley's beliefs and social ideals. In Shelley's mind, Apollo the sun god showcases the majesty and power of nature. As the god of "light" and "sunshine" which can be visualized, Apollo has always been associated with visual art. In *Hymn of Apollo* this visualization was depicted with the circular activity of Apollo from sunrise to the noon then to its setting in the west. In the first stanza of the poem, Shelley describes the beautiful scenes when Apollo the sun god waking up in the east at the call of the Dawn Goddess when darkness was about to pass, and all things were revived. Behind the picturesque images of the morning star, the earth, the moon, and other images, there are deities such as the hour, dawn, moon, and stars who fulfill their respective duties and abide by established orders. In the following stanzas Apollo strides above the peaks of mountains and the ocean waves, tours the entire sky, scatters light and warmth all over on the earth, and overlooks the grandeur of the ocean and land. He believes that he has brought light, justice, goodness, and beauty to the world and humanity ("The sunbeams are my shadows, with which I kill it, that loves the night and fears the day"). Later Apollo had to walk down the high and wide sky with reluctance and sink into the western ocean. But Apollo proudly declared, "All holiness, beauty, harmony, brightness, victory, and praise will belong to me, the God of Light, Apollo."

Next is the magnificent scene of the sun rising: Apollo's corresponding spirit of the sun god, which is the embodiment of the shining and shining, and its real name is "Brightness". It exerts its original charm, illuminating the entire sky and earth, including the deep caves.

I step on the mountains and oceans, and flames (light) illuminate the clouds and caves, illuminating the earth. Evil deeds will evade me, and conscience and magnanimity will gain new strength

Agricultural civilization has made human life more stable and regular, adapting to the direct relationship between the rise and fall of the sun, the alternation of day and night, and the changes of the four seasons.

Apollo was dressed in a purple red robe and sat on a throne, with emerald shining on his body. There were sun, moon, year, and period attendants standing on the left and right, and at each hour, he also stood in two chambers, at equal distances from each other (Ovid, 2007: 22).

The initial poetic act of the last paragraph is: I am the eye with which the universe holds itself and knows its own divinity, all harmony of instrument or verse, all philosophy, all medicine, are mine, all light of art or nature, to my song Victory and practice in their own right long.

### **Pan: The rebellious, destructive god of the forest**

The *Hymn of Pan* is also a 36-line poem, which was later published in three stanzas. The number of lines is equivalent to that of *Hymn of Apollo*. Shelley did not particularly favor Apollo. Pan also harbored Shelley's strong emotions.

In *Hymn of Pan*, Pan, as the son of Bacchus, has a symbol similar to Bacchus. It symbolizes the indulgence of emotions – the excitement and total stimulation and release of emotions. The love of Dionysus carries a metaphysical depth of tragic emotions. The birth of tragedy also symbolizes an experience of breaking the constraints of individualization and returning to primitive nature. Although the disintegration of an individual is a pain, the experience of breaking the constraints relieves all pain and helps obtain the highest happiness of integration with the world itself. Pan, like Bacchus, has a state of madness intertwined with pain and ecstasy. It is the manifestation of the world's intrinsic emotions, the individual impulse to deny itself and return to the world's essence.

The rebellious spirit of Pan is also a representative of Shelley's ideals and beliefs. He rebelled against the established laws of the universe, revealing a free and rebellious nature in the most primitive emotions. Represents the courage and determination to fight against established order. Pan Shen is full of primitive impulsiveness and a rough and bold masculine temperament. The opening of *Hymn of Pan* is a very different, livelier scene than the *Hymn of Apollo*. Pan, as the god of the forest, invites various characters to join his audience.

John Milton in his *Paradise Lost* famously wrote about “Pan of the universe”, where Pan represents primitive nature as opposed to civilization. Compared to Apollo's loneliness, tranquility, and solemnity, Pan was collective, ecstatic, and impulsive, just like dissolving the individual Dionysian spirit. Pan represents a completely rebellious spirit of Shelley. While Apollo represented the highest achievement in the musical field, Pan was the combative and rebellious character. Apollo's art has clear boundaries and strives to express reality in a perfect and stable form, while Pan immerses himself in primal passion, making music that lacks boundaries and structure, mocking all civilization.

In the final stanza, Pan makes into a mournful tone, mourning the love he had for Syrinx, who had never sought it. Syrinx eventually turned into a flute, just like Daphne, who refused the continuous chase of Apollo and turned into a laurel tree to get rid of him. Two gods who are both prisoners of love have empathy here. Suffering is manifested through the “love” that cannot be desired. This kind of love that cannot be desired is not only the love of men and women, but also far greater than the love of men and women.

At Eton, Shelley rebelled against the harsh and ruthless education system, and the “patriarchal”

and subordinate relationship between the higher and lower grade students of the school, thus earning the nickname “crazy Shelley” (Maurois, 1981: 3). The anonymous *The Necessity of Atheism* was published under the influence of the anarchist William Godwin. In 1811 he was expelled from Oxford University. In February 1812, Shelley and his wife traveled to Dublin Ireland to “work towards accelerating the liberation of Catholics.” (ibid.: 79). However, the “numbness” of the Irish made Shelley deeply disappointed and disheartened (ibid.:79).

Shelley used the characters of Apollo and Pan to illustrate the essence, function, and meaning of poetry in life. These two poems reflect Shelley's understanding of a society from which he was driven away. Shelley was exiled from England, suffered neglect in Dublin, and fled to Italy, confronting great obstacles. The harshness of this experience forced Shelley to reconsider his revolutionary ideals. He had to turn to his heart and express his ideas in poetry.

Shelley projected his longing for humanity into his poems. Poetry is “both center and circumference of knowledge; it encompasses all sciences, and all sciences must be traced back to it” (Shelley, 1984: 122). Shelley viewed poetry as a weapon with a social function, a source of social responsibility, and a sacred mission. To him, only poetry can provide humanity with the highest sense of pleasure, while the temporary and individual pleasures pursued by those who advocate for practical utility cannot be achieved. Shelley emphasized that poetry is not about moral preaching. Though he was deeply influenced by Plato's ideas of “goodness, beauty, and justice”, he believed that the highest level of personal pursuit is “the supreme good”, which is the purification and sublimation of the soul.

He hoped to inspire the public with language, guide human progress with art, and help improve society. Poetry can “awaken the heart and expand the realm of the heart, making it capable of accommodating many incomprehensible thoughts.” The joy that generates and guarantees the highest meaning is the true function of poetry (Shelley, 1984: 150). Shelley puts his creative and social ideals into his poetry. For some, he is a model of human nature and ideal. As described by Karl Marx, he is a “beautiful yet unrealistic Angel flapping his shimmering silver wings in the air”, and a “true revolutionary, always a pioneer of socialism” (Marx, XXX).

Shelley criticized the British feudal, autocratic and capitalist exploitation of Ireland in *Queen Mab* (1812). The three roles played by the protagonist - poet, philosopher, and fighter, in the subsequent *The Revolt of Islam*, combined “the singing nature of rhythmic language and ethereal fantasies” aiming to ignite “a noble passion for freedom and justice” among readers. In the preface of *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley urges his readers to “remember noble and beautiful ideals”. In the ideal society, Shelley understands that a poet would be “an unrecognized legislator in the world... the maker of laws, the founder of a civilized society, the inventor of various arts in life,

and even a mentor (Shelley, 1984: 160). Shelley projects the “future” into the “present” in his poetry, inspiring himself and his peers to strive for the awakening of Britain and the realization of ideological and institutional reforms.

Shelley’s praise of Apollo is a call for brightness and justice, for integrity and magnanimity based on his experiences in England and Ireland. Shelley’s admiration of the sun god is also an appeal to universal order and a calm peaceful spirit, in the most solemn way, in the appearance of full joy, wisdom, and beauty. As one of the dazzling Romantic poets of the 19th century, Shelley uses Apollo to express his dreams in a pursuit of truth, which can be seen in all his works. Shelley had a passion for philosophical issues such as the nature of existence and consciousness, unity and opposition, finite and infinite, love and hatred, good and evil. The image of Apollo, an ancient and young male god, represents the solemnity, self-control, and order that Shelley envisioned for the future society. Shelley’s praise of Apollo was primarily about Apollo’s maintenance of order. Shelley’s incomplete idea of social reform is also noteworthy. The sun god Apollo in his beautiful appearance provides an Illusion of an ideal, behind which is the pain and conflict of the real world. Nietzsche argued that the appearance of Apollo represents a formative art, while Dionysus (like Pan) represents a non-formative one, which requires “moderate restraint, freedom from strong stimuli, and the great wisdom and tranquility of the deity of form.” (1986: 4)

Shelley tirelessly explored the future of humanity and constructed an ideal society of equality, freedom, and happiness for all in his poems. The firm belief in Shelley in a better future not only came from the influence of utopian socialism, but also from his revered pantheistic idea of change, a belief in the return of the sun (and Apollo) stemming from a conversion to the eternal law of change in all things in the universe. The descending of the sun god is only a short period of an eternal movement of renewal, in which the dark reality will eventually pass, and a bright future will surely come. Shelley’s determination to reverse the madness of the modern world and overthrow the evil in power and in authority gained a solid foundation in the Greek mythological and metaphysical world of Shelley’s poetry. Shelley restores vitality of life for a human society that has suffered from the alienation of industrial civilization by trying to repair the relationship between humans and nature.

The *Hymn of Apollo* is a song of the self. The entire poem is centered around Apollo's perspective and feelings, completely and vividly expressing oneself and one’s distinct personality, consistent with the overall characteristics of British Romanticism emphasizing individual rights and dignity. The entire poem is a demonstration of Apollo's power and a journey from darkness to light. The six stanzas of the poem are almost all spoken, watched, and expressed by Apollo. Although it tells the story of a musical competition with Pan, the poem fails to mention the audience, although Apollo was surrounded by his admirers and supporters. While he protected them, they also



revered him. As the favorite son of Zeus, Apollo's temple was located in the center of the world, symbolizing a predetermined order when he announced Zeus' predictions to the world. Under his rule, everything was well organized and he was highly respected. They all obeyed his commands, as Apollo embodied authority and order as a giver, protector, and father.

Apollo and his symbolic order, kindness, justice, and heroic demeanor echoed Shelley's strong personal desire to be like the sun god, and to be a god himself. For Shelley, the loneliness he saw in the character of Apollo reflects his resistance to social constraints. This is a key to understanding the philosophy, politics, and sentiments of what is commonly referred to as the Romantic movement (Russell, 1982: 222).

Shelley's understanding of the cyclical movements of the sun's descent and the alternation of day and night, as well as his strong interest in physics and chemistry, not only drew on the ideas of Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke, Hume, and others, but also allowed him to contemplate the problems of religion from afar. In addition, the social reality of the time, the influence of French Enlightenment writers, and the influence of Goethe's anarchist ideology, influenced Shelley with the ideas of freedom, democracy, peace, and atheism.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, Shelley expressed the contradiction of his philosophical ideas on the reinterpretation of morality from an atheist perspective in *Hymn of Apollo* and *Hymn of Pan*. Shelley forms a utopia in which two kinds of moralities - protective Apollo and the destructive Pan are discussed, combated and evaluated. Shelley cannot find an efficient solution to the social problems in either England or Ireland. His dreams of the utopia society is still remained.

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