17BAE01 GCE English Literature

Folder 3

A comparison of the ways in which Percy Bysshe Shelley and Tom Stoppard explore features of Romanticism in *Selected Poems* and *Arcadia* with a consideration of different interpretations and the contexts in which they were written and received

'Romantic' today connotes images of sentimentality and love, but historically this term holds much wider meaning. The Romantic era was a cultural philosophical movement born in response to arguably the most transformative era of British history; the industrialisation of the early 19th Century. This led to new ways of looking at the world; Romanticism prioritising imagination above reason.[1] Although two very different texts in both form and purpose, the mutual theme of Romanticism in both *Arcadia* and *Selected Poems* unites the two; one exploring the contemporarily advanced ideas on the exploration of human emotion, whilst the other retrospectively reflecting upon the effects such ideas have had for both contemporary and modern audiences. Through their portrayal of key Romantic ideologies, the authors allow the audience's interpretation of ideas into our own lives. Through exploration of these principles, we can ultimately understand the place of Romantic beliefs in popular culture.

Shelley, as a second generation Romantic poet, contributed to the Romantic movement contemporarily. His poems, all published in the decade 1811-1821 personify key Romantic ideals expressed through devices such as rhyme and rhythm. Stoppard conversely, explores Romanticism retrospectively from a 1990s postmodern perspective, comparing the Regency and Modern periods through Brechtian staging techniques; including the multi-rolling of Augustus/Gus and use of 'historicism as a convention of verfremdungseffekt'[2]- making the audience a conscious observer of the play, rather than being emotionally involved like the audience of Shelley.

The reverence of nature is an essential part of Romantic philosophy explored by both Stoppard and Shelley. Shelley held atheist beliefs, publishing 'The Necessity of Atheism' during his time at Oxford University, writing there was 'no proof in the existence of a

[1] S. Forward (2005)
[2] BBC (2016)

Deity'[3]. In the absence of religious doctrine, Shelley turned to nature as a source of inspiration. In *Adonais*, Keats is deified as a King of Nature, with 'head bound with pansies overblown' as even nature mourns him. Grief in the poem is represented by the passing of seasons; having 'come and gone' like the hardships of winter but returning 'with the revolving year'. This cyclic seasonal theme is recurrent in many of Shelley's works[4], showing both the longevity of nature and the endurance of the human spirit even after death. The 'pilot' 'guiding' Shelley could be interpreted as nature itself, as he believed in the 'Divine Spirit'. 'The Spirit' of nature in *The Cloud* supports the interpretation that nature itself is the divinity taking Keats into the afterlife. Nature in *Arcadia*, whilst more abstract than in Shelley's poetry, is still an importantly Romantic feature. Stoppard uses the central metaphor of the garden at Sidley Park as a representation of the natural world, with a prominent focus on man's manipulative relationship with nature- not dissimilarly to Shelley's focus on the relationship between man and the natural world in *Ozymandias.* As summarised by Hannah '[the garden] is a Gothic novel expressed in landscape'. This hints at the influence of contemporary literature spilling into popular culture, as we know that 'Lord Little' also has the 'misfortune' of having a garden in the 'new style', but also cements the garden as a metaphor for romantic ideology of expression. A comparable point in *Ozymandias*, who personifies the influence of man in nature can be made when the statue who was once the 'king of kings', becomes a 'shattered visage' at the exposure to the natural forces of the desert.

It is also likely that Shelley drew comfort from the power of nature, as summarised in a review of *Lines Written Among Euganean Hills* where the reviewer believes 'a sense of peace' for Shelley was generated 'from his contemplation of the natural scene around him.'[5]. Using a psychoanalytical perspective, this could reveal Shelley evoking his audience to take the same comfort from nature at such tragic times in their own lives, as *Lines* begins as a 'meditation on mortality'[6]- significant as the poem was published in

[3] The Necessity of Atheism, (1815)
[4] The Cloud (1820)
[5] The New Nation (2015)
[6] B. Woodcock (1994)

1818-the same year Shelley's daughter Clara died[7]. It seems during the hardest of times Shelley drew comfort from the beauty of the natural world, which continually supports the interpretation that for Shelley nature was God-like in its ability to heal the soul.

Stoppard also explores a link between nature and religion. An epitomising quotation on the theme of nature comes from Septimus in Act One, where Mr Noakes in the scheme of the garden is referred to as 'the serpent'. The determiner 'the' connotes Mr Noakes to the iconic biblical 'Serpent' in the Garden of Eden. Serpent in this context is synonymous to Satan, so in using this metaphor Stoppard could be negatively questioning man's authority to manipulate nature. If Stoppard held similar Romantic views to Shelley's, this could be a message that man's power to manipulate nature, does not make him God, he could also become Satan. In this sense, the metaphor could be a warning about the fragility of nature and the harm we potentially pose to it. This is certainly arguable as the model for nature is again questioned by Bernard, 'don't confuse progress with perfectibility'. In this way it is conceivable that both authors use their metaphors as a means of edifying the audience to preserve a belief in the wonder of nature that is so intrinsic to Romanticism. Arguably, this is most relevant in modern times due to the increasing strain on the natural world by global warming and huge impacts of pollution. Stoppard would have been aware of this problem as in 1992, the year before *Arcadia's* publication, the Earth Summit Meeting was organised by the Rio Convention, where for the first time global warming was discussed on a global scale and the need to live in 'harmony with nature'.[8] was brought to international attention.

During Shelley's contemporary time, there was no such issue as industrialization was only beginning. *Adonais* embodies this as the poem as a whole has a very organic and natural rhythm. As is typical with Spenserian stanzas, the first nine lines are written in iambic pentameter with the ninth and final line written in iambic hexameter. Although this is a rigid structure, the enjambed lines flow into one another fluidly 'though our tears/ Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head', and the poem reads euphoniously and unforced like the natural flow of a river- which is personified in Stanza XVIII. The

[7] C. Stahmer
[8] United Nations Environment Programme (1992)

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repetition of this rhythm in every stanza, as well as the fluid enjambed lines mirror Shelley's message about the transcendence of life across the physical boundary after death, represented by the physical space between lines and the continuity of the soul into the afterlife like the continuity of the rhythm through each stanza. Nature becomes inseparable from the form, imagery and message of the poem as well as from Keats himself was 'made-one with Nature'. The *Daily New Nation* identified *Adonais* as 'the most striking illustration of Shelley's pantheism'[9] towards the natural world, echoing his unique relationship with nature in and out of his poetry.

Alongside nature, love and sex have an elevated place in the Romantic doctrine. In many poems Shelley conveys the typical Romantic philosophy emphasising the beautiful, artistic natures of love and sex. His beliefs about love are summarised 'This is Love. This is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything which exists'[10]. Shelley's view on love and sex would have been different to Stoppard's as Shelley's attitude would have been tainted by the patriarchal society he lived in. This influence can be seen in the quotation; 'man with man' which could also support the 'homerotic' theory that Shelley and other notable Romantics were *'ardent hellenists, whose reference point for male love was the homoerotic ethos of Ancient Greece'* [11] Particularly in *Epipsychidion*, his use of perfect rhymes and fast paced rhythms, notably 'eclipse/lips' [12]reflect the perfection of sex. The juxtaposition of the natural noun 'eclipse' with the human noun 'lips' could demonstrate how sex links the human and natural worlds together, and explain love's connection to 'everything that exists'. Though contrastingly, in *Adonais* there is a distinct lack of sex. Possibly because of the purpose of the poem; as a pastoral elegy, sex is not appropriate. But could alternatively be because of the emphasis on philia and agape love which Shelley could be arguing is equally, or even more important than eros love in this tragic circumstance of Keats' death. Urania, who in traditional Greek mythology was Adonis' lover, has become a 'melancholy' 'childless Mother' at the death of Keats. The adaptation of Urania into a mother exhibiting maternal love elevates the place of love in the poem as Urania herself

[9] The New Nation (2015)
[10] A Defence of Poetry and other Essays: On Love (1815)
[11] John Lauritsen (2008)
[12] Epipsychidion, Shelley (1821)

is the Goddess of Universal Love. This outpouring of emotion from Urania, who for three stanzas can only 'weep' and 'weep anew', could be evoking the contemporary audience to connect with their own emotions- a significant Romantic belief in the power of emotion to 'heal the soul'. In *Arcadia,* Stoppard adopts the more traditional Romantic approach of sex being integral throughout the play. The play opens questioning 'carnal embrace' asserting sex as a prominent theme . From here the play carries the theme of sex across both the Regency and Modern periods climaxing in Thomasina and Septimus' kiss and Hannah and Gus' dance in the final scenes. Throughout, sex is presented as the equal and opposite of academia with Septimus realising the unfulfilling nature of academic breakthroughs, yet learning to appreciate the fulfillment of love- highlighted by the brief kiss with Thomasina.

Academic knowledge is never far from carnal knowledge with superior academic knowledge giving power in the relationships- particularly between Thomasina and Septimus, and Hannah and Bernard. Sex is equated to heat in the play- suggesting that like heat, it is essential to human survival. Thomasina's theory of heat exchange and sex is explained by Chloe who tells Valentine sex is 'the attraction [Newton] left out' in his deterministic universe. The reference of sex in the context of science proves what an essential element of the play it is- tying the different themes and eras together much like contemporary Romantics believed love and sex were a way of 'reaching higher levels of existence' [13]and otherwise undiscoverable happiness. Although, reader response approaches highlight the disadvantage of this technique of 'verfremdungseffekt' as a way of exploring Romantic ideologies as 'demanding too much of audiences intellectually and indulging them too little emotionally'[14]. A psychoanalytical approach could reveal the academic bewilderment of the audience to be Stoppard making a point of a modern audience's lack of intellectual rigor. This could be seen as his call to society back to academia, to restore it to the same importance it held in the Regency period that is portrayed on stage. Shelley shares this belief in the power of knowledge, as demonstrated in *Epipsychidion* where books are described as 'instruments with which high Spirits call'. Shelley's pantheist beliefs elevate this

[13] Sabo, Literature Network (2006)
[14] William A. Henry III, (1993)

importance, as by associating books with 'high Spirits' he is placing a similar importance on knowledge to the 'Divine Spirit' which was arguably his God.

The principle of fate is another central and iconically Romantic theme in both texts. Shelley shares his own emotions with the audience to question the equity of fate. The initial mood of dejection in the first stanzas where Shelley repetitively calls for the mourners to 'weep for Adonais' challenges fate; but in a different way to *Arcadia*. The outpouring of grief from Shelley could be seen as him questioning the fairness of Keats' death suggesting he was taken before his time, and has therefore been cheated by fate. Going on to infantilize Keats, 'thy youngest dearest one', this draws comparisons between his death and that of a child- challenging Keats' fate as surely no child is born to die. In Shelley's own life he experienced the tragic deaths of both his children within a year of 1818. Though despite his obvious grief, Shelley argues that 'his fate and fame shall be an echo and light unto eternity' implying that despite his premature death, Keats' legacy will continue to be an inspiration for those left on earth, and that even in the afterlife, Keats will fulfill his fate as a 'beacon' guiding our actions on Earth. The symbolism of light is similar in *The Cloud* and *Epipsychidion* where Shelley uses repetition of light imagery, specifically the Sun to emphasise the recurrent nature of life '*the eternal Sun'*[15]. His personification of the Sun as one who 'arises again' at the end of each day, supports his message in *Adonais* that Keats' and all of our deaths are not the end. The questioning of fate is also representative in *Arcadia*. Here fate is inextricably linked with Thomasina's hinting at the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and the belief that, like rice pudding, life is 'unchanging and unchangeable' once it has been stirred.This questions the typically Romantic idea of transposable fate, as the definite adjective 'unchangeable' connotes a pre-determined outcome to our lives, and challenges the idea of our free will to make decisions that have any effect on our lives, thus changing our fate. Stoppard extends this metaphor throughout the play continually using physics to reflect the twists of fate within the story, particularly with reference to Chaos Theory, which suggests that 'people's lives are not simple and predictable'[16]as previously believed. The Romantic philosophy was all about changing how people

[15] Epipsychidion (1821)
[16] M. Crone (1998)

thought, so this exploration of fate by Thomasina and Septimus reflects the wider exploration into fate by Romantic thinkers at the time.

Fate is continually explored in relation to free will throughout *Arcadia.* The principle of 'determinism' is explored by both the Regency and Modern characters. This is epitomised by Hannah's simile of the hermit being 'placed' in the landscape 'exactly as one might place a gnome'. The use of the verb 'placed' questions the idea of free will, suggesting that a more authoritative individual exerted power over the 'gnome' in positioning him, possibly against his will. In the context of the Regency era, Stoppard may have used this as a focaliser for the oppression of society as this was a period in which the upper classes thrived, often at the expense of the lower classes. Similarly, Shelley too seems to have a political agenda as he also advocated for a more equal society in his contemporary era. This is evident in the *'Mask of Anarchy'* written in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre, in which 50,000 passive political campaigners calling for a reform of Parliament were attacked by the army killing 11 people[17] it is proclaimed that 'ye are as God had made ye, free'[18]. The emphasis of freedom in the height of the Romantic era highlights this as a contextually important feature of Romanticism. Adopting a postmodernist view, both authors campaigning for equality through the metanarrative purposes of their works heightens the importance of equality in the context of Romanticism, applicable to any society not merely those dealt with within the texts.

Indeed the place of Romanticism in relation to the purpose of literature is significant for both texts. For both, the purpose of providing personal expression for the author is key in understanding the texts. *Adonais* for Shelley can be interpreted formally as a personal outpouring of grief and emotion at the death of Keats.The poem's form as a pastoral elegy supports this. But secondarily however, Shelley's poems also advocate Romantic beliefs through the example that Shelley sets himself, e.g the continual 'weeping for Adonais'. Stoppard's motivation however is far more complex. A Marxist interpretation of *Arcadia* could be that Stoppard is imploring his modern audience to

[17] BBC (2008)
[18] Shelley, Mask of Anarchy (1819)

question the value of our society, represented by the Modern characters of Hannah and Bernard in relation to that of the Regency characters Thomasina and Septimus. The changed nature of their relationships is highlighted by the comparison of Septimus and Thomasina's relationship with that of Hannah and Bernard. Stoppard may have intended this juxtaposition to draw attention to the ways in which as a society we have regressed since the Regency period in terms of social behaviour, which itself was notorious for its shallowness and archaic attitudes. Stoppard's time as a refugee, forced to leave his native Czechoslovakia because of the Nazi invasion during WW2, would have exposed him to some of the worst attributes of human nature. Stoppard is still active in helping refugees today; travelling in February 2016 to the aid of contemporary refugees in the crisis in Calais with the Good Theatre Company.[19] In this sense, Stoppard's reintroduction of Romantic philosophies within his play could be an attempt to right the wrongs of our society and make us question our own values in relation to the more respectful and dignified Romantic ones.

The context of *Arcadia*'s publication in 1993 draws parallels to the emergence of Shelley's Romantic poetry as both texts follow drastic changes in society, especially within the field of technology. The Industrial Revolution's modern counterpart came in the radical technological advancements of the late 20th Century, notably the creation of the 'World Wide Web' in 1989.[20]After this, a similar fear of mechanisation of humanity that followed industrialism in the 18th and 19th Centuries circulated and presented itself culturally through the arts. Potentially, *Arcadia* was written to counteract this widespread dehumanisation using Romantic philosophy. As Paul Foot argues on Henderson's website '*[Shelley's] poetry can inspire them to write and talk with a new energy, a new confidence and a new splendour, then there is no telling what will happen'.*[21]

Through analysis of these texts, we can ultimately understand the place of Romantic beliefs in popular culture as one that is applicable to both contemporary eras, as well as now, in our daily lives. The authors Shelley and Stoppard use iconic Romantic

[19] Independent Catholic News (2016)
[20] History.com (2010)
[21] Paul Foot (2016)

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symbolism in an attempt to evoke reform within society, and whilst Shelley's approach is more direct than Stoppard's, both are successful in giving these often neglected principles a new voice. The question now, is whether or not we choose to listen.

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