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### Love, Self, and Moral - Response to "On Love"

Percy Shelley wrote "On Love" during the summer of 1818 in Italy. Personally, I think this is a very underrated work of him. To start, Shelley throws out a question to the readers: what is love? Then he makes the analogy with life and faith, hinting that the ones who love might not be able to explain what love truly is. Nevertheless, he attempts to explore the meaning of love.

First, Shelley reveals that in life, he is frequently misled by the appearance of other men, assuming that similar outlooks might indicate a deeper level of connection and understanding. However, that effort to seek something in common only results in "repulse and disappointment" (Shelley 503). Then, Shelley addresses the reader again, and announces that love is when we "seek to awaken in all things that are a community with what we experience within ourselves" (503). To Shelley, to love is to truly understand and sympathize with one another, and that understanding fulfills the void we find within ourselves and connects not only man to man, but everything that exists in this world.

Shelley goes on to bring up an idea that the mind "thirst after its likeness" (504), which deeply intrigues me. Shelley states that deep within ourselves there is an "ideal prototype" (504), which is void of all the human flaws and fulfills all our potentials, and that it is our nature to seek even just the "faintest shadow" (504) of that prototype. Floyd Stovall wrote in his book *Desire and Restraint in Shelley* that Shelley only loved the women in his life because he saw in them the

embodiment of what he loved the most about himself. Is it possible that Shelley's love is largely egoistic? According to Shelley, it is human nature to admire and pursue things that are similar to us and our ideals. Then in a way, when we love, we are just in love with ourselves and what we could live up to one day.

Shelley's "ideal prototype" of human plays a crucial role in his interpretation of love. According to him, it is "a mirror that reflects only in form of purity and brightness, a soul within our soul" (504). I can't help but think of Plato's concept of the ideal self, which is achieved when the rational mind governs over human desires. It is clear that to Plato, the ideal self is one with a steady moral and great self control. As Shelley points out in his "A Defence of Poetry", "The great secret of morals is Love". The ideas of moral and love are intertwined, as moral is the key to an ideal self, which is the object of love.

However, as Shelley points out, although the thirst for love and understanding is deep within our nature, love is "invisible and unattainable" (504). Therefore, when we are in solitude, which is most prevalent in life, we turn to the "tongueless melody" (504) of nature for comfort. Nevertheless, we never stop to search for the "soul within our soul"(504), for if we loose our desire to unite ourselves with those who truly sympathize with us, life would become meaningless and "man becomes the living sepulchre of himself" (504).

Shelley wrote on the footnotes of "On Love": "these words are inefficient and metaphorical" (504), and does not really help him explain his idea of love. As Floyd Stovall points out in his book "Desire and Restraint in Shelley", Shelley "made little effort to reduce his multiform ideas and impressions to strict order". To Shelley, writing is not only an artistic creation, but also a cathartic relief of his thoughts.