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ENGL 331

28 February 2024

Shelley's Charioteer

Shelley's unfinished poem *The Triumph of Life* describes a speaker's prophetic dream, which contains a depiction of a flying chariot led by a shadowy, hooded figure. The poem raises questions about the natural world, the contrast between life and death, individual legacy, and perception. Shelley uses this image of a chariot steered by a personification of life to convey his thoughts surrounding these topics, contributing to Shelley's alignment with the 19th century's Romantic literature movement. Shelley emphasizes the roles of the individual figures attached to the chariot, who range from Enlightenment philosophers to historical rulers, embodying the Romantic focus on individualism and a skepticism of the importance of individual legacies. Furthermore, Shelley's belief in a vision beyond human reason is underscored by the charioteer's ability to navigate despite its bandaged eyes, emphasizing a transcendence that surpasses mortal capabilities and individual human experiences. Overall, Shelley's image of a chariot steered by a blind personification of life, combined with the diverse selection of historical figures bound to it, clearly demonstrates Shelley's Romantic attitudes towards the topics of fate, legacy, human perception, and the natural world.

Firstly, Shelley chooses to describe the charioteer as a personified representation of life itself. The narrator states: "Half to myself I said, 'And what is this? / Whose shape is that within the car? & why'— / I would have added—'Is all here amiss?' / But a voice answered.. 'Life'" (lines 178-180). This is significant because it portrays life as a character with agency that

actively steers the chariot, rather than a passive figure. Additionally, Shelley states that a “captive multitude” is attached to the chariot, later depicting the charioteer as a “conqueror” (119, 240). The inclusion of these phrases further contributes to Shelley’s depiction of life as a figure with agency; the charioteer, and by extension, life itself, is capable of determining an individual’s destiny. Furthermore, the idea that the charioteer blindly and relentlessly pilots the chariot forward, capturing individuals as it moves along its path, further contributes to these questions surrounding free will and the nature of fate. Shelley writes that the chariot travels with “its own rushing splendor,” rushing “majestically on” with “solemn speed,” also noting the presence of its “ever moving wings” (87, 98, 106). Shelley’s diction, emphasizing the chariot’s hasty and relentless travel, further contributes to his portrayal of life as a driving force that conquers and carries individuals. Through Shelley’s personification of life as a figure that actively pilots a chariot, pulling with it the individuals it has conquered, he effectively raises Romantic questions about fate and the passage of time.

Next, Shelley emphasizes the lives of the individual historical figures attached to the chariot, underscoring Romantic themes of individualism. Rousseau, an Enlightenment philosopher, acts as the speaker’s guide through his dream vision. In *The Triumph of Life*, he advises the speaker about the figures attached to the chariot: “Said then my guide, ‘those spoilers spoiled, Voltaire, / Frederic, and Kant, Catherine, and Leopold, / Chained hoary anarchs, demagogue and sage / Whose name the fresh world thinks already old— / For in the battle Life and they did wage / She remained conqueror” (235-240). Shelley is referring to the historical leaders King Frederic II of Prussia, Catherine II of Russia, Leopold II, as well as the Enlightenment thinkers Rousseau, Voltaire, and Kant. He is emphasizing that all members of this vast array of historical figures with vastly different legacies have all been conquered by life.

Shelley's focus on these individual historical figures demonstrates the Romantic ideal of individualism and casts doubt on the importance of human legacy.

Also, Shelley provides further insight as to why the charioteer has captured these figures: "The chariot rolled a captive multitude / Was driven; all those who had grown old in power / Or misery, --all who have had their age [in this case, meaning historical period] subdued, / By action or by suffering, and whose hour / Was drained to its last sand in weal or woe" (119-123).

Essentially, Shelley is stating that these figures have been taken captive regardless of their legacy and the power or suffering they have experienced in life; they have all been subdued by the passage of time. Furthermore, the theme of life as a driving force that brings us closer and closer to the end of our lives, symbolized by the passage of the chariot, is further emphasized by the statement "Whose hour / Was drained to its last sand in weal or woe" (122-123). This statement highlights the inevitability of time's passage and its ability to render all suffering and legacy ultimately insignificant. As Rousseau describes the historical figures attached to the chariot as having "[names] the fresh world thinks already old" (238), he further expresses his belief in legacy being ultimately insignificant in the greater context of life.

Finally, Shelley uses his description of the charioteer to emphasize the Romantic ideal of a type of perception that transcends human limitations. He mentions that "All four faces of that charioteer / Had their eyes banded" (99-100). Despite the charioteer's bandaged eyes, he is still able to pilot his chariot through the sky with ease. Shelley goes on to write: "Little profit brings / Speed in the van and blindness in the rear, / Nor then avail the beams that could quench the Sun / Or that these banded eyes could pierce the sphere / Of all that is, has been, or will be done" (100-104). Interpreting this passage is the key for gaining a greater understanding of the transcendentalism present in this poem. As mentioned previously, the charioteer is a

personification of life, and his chariot's persistent passage through the sky is representative of fate. Shelley is describing the charioteer's ability to see in a way that transcends mortal limitations; no human eyes can extinguish the sun or perceive fate. The charioteer's vision is so far beyond what is achievable by humans, emphasizing the idea that there are aspects of life that are so far out of human reason to be incomprehensible; Shelley believes in a form of spiritual insight and enlightenment beyond mortal capabilities. This is further supported by the paradoxical idea that the charioteer is blinded yet is able to see and guide the chariot. The charioteer can even see beyond this, as he has insight into the past, present, and future simultaneously. This apparent contradiction again demonstrates a transcendent, incomprehensible property of life that cannot be ascertained by human reason alone. The charioteer's "blindness" also symbolizes the limits of human perception and understanding, as he is still merely a personification of life that still has human qualities. Through Shelley's description of the charioteer's bandaged eyes, he conveys his philosophical belief in a form of perception that transcends mortal capability, aligning with Romantic ideals of intuition, transcendence, and imagination, rejecting the Enlightened notion that human reason is capable of discerning all truths.

Overall, Shelley's depiction of the charioteer in *The Triumph of Life* effectively conveys his philosophical perspectives on life, individual legacy, the passage of time, and the limitations of human perception. The charioteer, being a personification of life that constantly steers his chariot forwards, highlights life as an active agent of fate that conquers individuals. The individual historical figures attached to the chariot hints at the inevitability of time's passage and the ultimate meaninglessness of individual legacy. Finally, Shelley's description of the charioteer

as having both blinded eyes and a perception of fate beyond human capabilities displays his belief in a form of perception that cannot be reached through human reason alone.