

**THE CREATIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE  
SERPENT IN SHELLEY**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Carolyn Ann Buffaloe Dorr entitled "The Creative and Destructive Serpent in Shelley." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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THE CREATIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE SERPENT IN SHELLEY

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An Abstract

Presented to

the Graduate Council of

Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Carolyn Ann Buffaloe Dorr

August 1970



## ABSTRACT

With its numerous historical and literary connotations acquired through the ages and its varied physical attributes, the serpent maintains a significant position in the symbolical realm, having obviously played a prominent part in mankind's affairs since the beginning of civilization. Its specific uses in the literature of many cultures from the time of the Ancients to the present day have been both pervasive and prolific. Especially do these characteristics of serpent symbolism apply to the literary tradition of the English Romantic poets, a most productive group of artists who made extensive use of many kinds of symbols to illustrate the supreme power of the creative imagination and to express their intense dissatisfaction with the preceding century and the social evils of their own time. This particular study specifically emphasizes and testifies to the abundance and variety of serpent imagery and symbolism in the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley.

Because of its physical characteristics, plus innumerable and meaningful religious, mythological, and past literary endowments, the serpent became a versatile implement for the Romantics' expression of primary aims and ideas. These poets endeavored to achieve a unification of sensibilities by advocating the importance both of sense perception and the spiritual aspect reached through the imagination. Although the Romantic poets were generally interested in the serpent's imaginative significance, they were particularly interested in its sensuous and evil qualities since they were rebels against supremacy of either the body or spirit over the other. Therefore, they opposed sensuality alone,



analytic reason, empiricism, dogmatism and any restraint of man's body or soul that restricted his progress toward ultimate achievement.

Blake created his own system of the "four-fold Vision," and from Songs of Innocence and Experience through his Prophetic Works, the poet emphasizes the snake's grasping and sensuous nature--the corrupt and groveling condition in humanity. His favorite portrayal of the viper is one that symbolizes his profound hatred and condemnation of "father, priest, and king." On the other hand, Wordsworth, advocating nature's spiritual and restorative power, symbolizes the idea that all creatures, even the lowly crawling reptile, is a sacred and necessary creation in God's whole scheme of things. Coleridge employs the serpent in a broader range of meanings than either Blake or Wordsworth by using it to illustrate sensual, creative, and spiritual elements. Even though he usually portrays the serpent in an evil manner, it is noteworthy that in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner he reverses this representation by describing the "water snakes" as symbols of beauty and spiritual power. Byron, like Blake and Shelley, was a devoted advocate of freedom over any form of tyranny, and the reptile is an especially useful symbol for representing those chief aspects of priest, king, and tyrant who maliciously endeavor to suppress mankind. Lamia is one of the most beautiful portrayals contrasting the power of the poetic imagination with that of philosophical thought and a lucid illustration of the discrepancy between appearance and reality, and Keats also employs the reptile because of its vigorous sensuous qualities.

Throughout this volume of Romantic poetry, the serpent has pervaded the creations of individual poets in various ways. It has portrayed many human frailties and attributes; it has symbolized

innumerable ideas and human actions, either for good or evil. The reptile has crawled from the lowest aspect to an upright position of esteem. Nevertheless, it still appears that no single poet surveys the serpent's complete and varied progress from its meanest to highest form, with the notable exception of Shelley. From this more detailed investigation of Shelley's serpent imagery, it is evident that the serpent, far from being a minor poetic emblem, is one of the poet's more meaningful symbols. It exemplifies all his central themes, his conceptions for the imaginative creation of poetry, and, most important, his optimistic aims and hopeful desires for mankind.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE SERPENT IN MYTH AND FOLKLORE

The serpent has played a prominent role in the secular and divine affairs of men since its original appearance in the Garden of Eden; and it has represented such diverse ideas as benevolence, evil, wisdom, power, reason, and sensuousness. Illustrating these attributes of good and evil, the serpent and related images have pervaded the literature of various cultures and attained noteworthy significance and a wide range of diversity in Shelley's poetry.

Quite naturally, the snake has been symbolic of knowledge and sex because of its relationship with the first temptation and its general physical characteristics. Considered a knower of secrets and the unknown, it is a figure of wisdom; and related to the sex act, often assumed to be the original sin for which mankind is still seeking atonement, the serpent of Eden is one of the major sexual emblems. Although sexual connotation of the reptile is based primarily upon its phallic qualities, the symbol is not always masculine; some scholars, along with Freud, have considered Medusa's head and like representations symbolic of the female principle.

In addition to psychiatric concern with serpent symbolism, the medical profession in general from the time of the ancient Greeks until our present day has used the snake as an emblem of healing power. This interest is associated with "the sign of Aesculapius, a god of healing, whose image, holding a curative serpent, was set among the stars by



Zeus."<sup>1</sup> The snake and staff of Aesculapius were a combined symbol of sex and healing; however, modern medicine has chosen perhaps to increase its chances for curative success by replacing Aesculapius' single snake with the serpent-entwined caduceus of Hermes. This staff was a symbol of the god's authority and was originally adorned with ceremonial white streamers, which later were imagined to be snakes because Hermes was messenger to Hades.<sup>2</sup> Also, these ribbons, mistaken for serpents, symbolized the sex act and were different from Aesculapius' snakes, which according to mythology took a more active part in granting their curative power by crawling among petitioners sleeping at his shrines.<sup>3</sup> The healing profession's regard for the serpent also has to do with Apollo, father of Aesculapius and divine patron of medicine, who killed the fierce dragon serpent, Python. The Greeks were especially fond of contests and greatly admired superior athletic ability and bravery; therefore, after Apollo had slain the serpent, they established the Pythian games at Delphi in honor of the god's victory. Since Apollo became the revered patron of these regularly held contests, his legendary association with the snake also continued.

Through the ages the serpent has figured prominently in religion and magic in numerous cultures. He is a sign of great power, represented by the Egyptian sacred asp and as an underworld god of the Greeks, in whose mythology he originally comes from the lower regions. In these earliest civilizations his religious role was an important one, and during

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (Baltimore, 1955), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>3</sup>Newton Bigelow, M.D., "Introduction," Serpent Imagery and Symbolism (New Haven, Conn., 1966), p. 3.

Hebrew times the serpent often became the Lord's instrument of instruction. Familiar to most people are Biblical serpents, which also suggest an underlying sexual reference. Described in the Book of Exodus, the Lord's power caused Aaron's rod to change into a serpent; and when the wise men and sorcerers threw down their rods, "they became serpents, but Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods."<sup>4</sup> Also, when "the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people" of Israel because of their excessive complaining, the snakes "bit the people, and much people of Israel died." Then the Lord instructed Moses to make "a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."<sup>5</sup> Israel may not have worshipped God in the semblance of a "golden calf," but adoration of the serpent was apparent; and some authorities believe that the ark of the covenant, rather than being empty, contained a brazen serpent.<sup>6</sup>

During modern times, the snake has been a prominent aspect in religion and magic throughout the world. One can easily imagine that the serpents which legend says that St. Patrick charmed from Ireland were sacred ones; and as recently as our own century, the reptile has been an integral part of Voodoo and other similar cults, whose avid and faithful followers live as far from us as Pakistan and India, and as near as the bayous of Louisiana and the eastern hills of Tennessee. Through the early years of this century, Marie Laveau, New Orleans queen of Voodoo, in whose ceremony the snake assumed a major role, reigned supreme

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<sup>4</sup>Exodus 7:8-12.

<sup>5</sup>Numbers 21:6-9.

<sup>6</sup>A Powell Davies, The Ten Commandments (New York, 1965).

among the Cajuns and exerted notable influence on residents of the Vieux Carre as well. In some mountain areas of Tennessee, advocates of certain religious sects have exhibited their faith in the Lord's protective power by passing poisonous reptiles among church congregations. Some adherents have died, and other have not; and according to their canon, the termination of man's earthly life is determined by his depth of inner faith in God's protection.

Although the sexual symbolism of the snake is important in myth and folklore, this study will emphasize other aspects of serpent symbolism. Originating with sexual union, which also means the reproduction of life, the serpent has become representative of something much broader--an all-emcompassing emblem of life itself, of perpetual and eternal life. With the shedding of its old skin for a new one, it stands for renewal of life or rejuvenation; and pictured with its tail in its mouth, the snake is an omnipotent deity, as he forms an unbroken circle, and as such is a sign of eternity. Throughout the whole of man's life cycle exist all the many attributes of good and evil, symbolized in literature and life itself by the serpent; and it is noteworthy to observe that even though many of us normally cringe and shrink from the actual sight of a crawling viper as something unpleasant and fearsome, it nevertheless has been a symbol associated with good as well as evil.



## CHAPTER II

### SERPENT SYMBOLISM IN THE ROMANTIC TRADITION

Serpent imagery has appeared abundantly in literature since the writings of the Ancients, and a few well-known reminders are the reptile's frequent roles in the Iliad, the Aeneid's snake-eagle combat, "The Wart," disguised as a grass snake in the legend of King Arthur, the serpent appearing in The Faerie Queene, and the beguiling and infamous serpent of Paradise Lost. However, it is especially well illustrated, as are other images, in Romantic poetry simply because basic Romantic ideas concerning life and literature lend themselves quite naturally to extensive employment of imagery and symbolism. The Romantics were dissatisfied with the tradition of the past century, which they thought represented analytical reasoning and dogmatic rules and consequently was incapable of comprehending spiritual truths. While acknowledging the power of the intellect, the Romantic poets declared that there was much more related to the apprehending of truth, and in "The Tables Turned" Wordsworth expresses the feeling of his period when he berates the "meddling intellect":

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things,--  
We murder to dissect.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, reason could accomplish merely half the job of attaining complete unity in thought and consequently the life of mankind. Reason

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<sup>1</sup>William Wordsworth, The Poetical Works of Wordsworth (Oxford, 1954), p. 57, ll. 25-28. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

was a useful factor in directing man through the concrete, actual world, but only through his intuitive imagination could man visualize and feel the much-desired spiritual, ideal world. Through the use of symbol, as opposed to arbitrary reason, man could free his imagination and see beyond the material world to that of the invisible and spiritual.

Yet, in fairness to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, perhaps it is well to point out that although some poets, primarily those on the Continent, advocated a strictly conservative view toward rules, form, and general philosophical thought of the time; others such as Pope, representing the Ancients in this battle with the Moderns, declares in An Essay on Criticism that some precepts are inadequate, that the greatest beauties spring from a "grace beyond the reach of art." On the other hand, although some writers in the neoclassical tradition did acknowledge the value of imagination and feeling, they feared any suggestion of wild fancy or extravagant imagination in need of the curb of judgment or good sense. The Augustans used the term imagination in a more restricted manner than the Romantics. Indeed, the literary aim of each tradition was different: the neoclassicists were often content to analyze and dissect the ideas and experiences of their well-ordered universe, while the Romantic poets freely soared beyond the commonplace in their desire to achieve the best there was for man.

Chiefly through reason and experience, poets of the preceding century perceived irreconcilable elements, as evidenced by such antitheses that constantly appear in their writings: invention and judgment, nature and art, the pleasing and the instructive, and many more. Oftentimes, the attempt to harmonize these opposing attitudes resulted in contradiction and vagueness, and Dryden and Pope preferred to represent these diverse ideas rather than to clarify or simplify the matters.

The Romantics advocated that through the intuitive imagination all things--body and spirit, commonplace and sublime, natural and supernatural--could be reconciled. In order to bring this reconciliation about, Blake created his own system of mythology; and Coleridge believed that imagination is the power which unites both the physical and spiritual aspects of man: ". . . Good sense is the Body of poetic genius, Fancy its Drapery, Motion its Life, and Imagination the Soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole."<sup>2</sup> In "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Wordsworth fully develops his theme that "the child is father to the man" and asserts that the innocent child's intuition is of greater value than the reasoning power of the adult. The farther man travels from his first heavenly home, the less distinct his perception becomes; and unless man uses his intuitive imagination to see beyond the barrier, he becomes confused and loses his direction. Even though reason guides him so far, only his imagination can finally lead him to his ultimate goal.

In his Preface to The Cenci, Shelley also expresses his lofty praise of man's imaginative power:

In a dramatic composition the imagery and the passion should interpenetrate one another, the former being reserved simply for the full development and illustration of the latter. Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion. It is thus that the most remote and the most familiar imagery may alike be fit for dramatic purposes when employed in the illustration of strong feeling, which raises what is low, and levels to the apprehension that which is lofty, casting over all the shadow of its own greatness.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (New York, 1906), p. 167.

<sup>3</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Complete Poetical Works (London, 1912), p. 274. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.



Unlike Shelley, looking forward to another world, Keats firmly believed in the reality of this world; however, he fully advocated the necessity of man's using his imaginative power. In correspondence to a friend, the poet discusses his ideas about the creation of poetry and refers to "Fancy as the sails and Imagination the Rudder,"<sup>4</sup> and in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats praises the imagination by saying, "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter . . ." Those things that one feels and sees are delightful, but the imagination captures their significant radiance.

Symbol, with its qualities of dream and shadow, suggests ideas and meaning rather than stating them explicitly, and this obviously accounts for various critical interpretations of the same image by different poets and other readers. Permitting one to draw on his own intuitive power further indicates the supreme value that the Romantic poets placed on individuality by their condemnation of any method preventing man from achieving his fullest physical and spiritual potential--restriction by established forms and ideas, civil law, and the church doctrine which prevented man from creating his own relationship with the Divine Power or Oneness in the universe. Religious concern of earlier periods seems to be attached to an orthodox form, but in the Romantic tradition the established church had no place since all poets appeared to be involved in discovering their own religions.

Although every man possesses the imaginative power, some neglect to use and develop this gift. George Wingfield Digby, in Symbol and

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<sup>4</sup>John Keats, The Letters of John Keats (London, 1952), p. 52.

Image in William Blake, states that ". . . man can never know the truth about himself, nor find in his relationships with the world that truth or reality which transcends them, unless he develops his power of intuition. The intuitive imagination, which works through symbols, is the very essence of art."<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note that oftentimes the Romantics symbolized by the serpent what they felt was a real evil in the literary tradition, the cold reason of the preceding century; and just as the serpent had encouraged Eve's independence in seeking knowledge, the Romantics endeavored to fight against whatever restricted the individuality of mankind. It is also interesting to recall that Byron called Shelley the "snake," and Shelley at one time referred to himself as "the serpent who had been shut out of paradise." Shelley makes this statement in the first line of his poem entitled "To Edward Williams," in which the poet refers to his friendship with Jane and Edward Williams. Shelley had suffered mental anxieties from his marital relationships, and at the time he wrote this poem, he and Mary, despondent over the loss of a child, found their association most trying and disagreeable. Therefore, Shelley sought companionship with friends, and Jane, who eventually became his new "idealized love," offered the sympathy and understanding that the poet could or would not seek in his own home-life. However, Mary soon curtailed her husband's frequent and happy visits with his friend, and Shelley thought of himself as "the serpent who had been shut out of paradise."

The following brief survey of the Romantic movement reveals that the Romantic poets were interested in the serpent's imaginative and

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<sup>5</sup>George Wingfield Digby, Symbol and Image in William Blake (Oxford, 1957), pp. 6-7.

symbolic significance, and especially in its sensuous appeal and evil nature. This summary will indicate representative uses of the serpent and is not intended as an exhaustive study of each poet's use of the symbol.

Blake employs numerous symbols in his poetry, and he had stated as his motto, "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another man's./ I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create."<sup>6</sup> In opposition to neoclassical thought that man, basically evil, must always be on guard and that moderation in all things is essential, Blake advocates freedom from restraint, and in the Marriage of Heaven and Hell insists that "One Law for Lion and Ox is Oppression." Blake does not see man as fallen because he went against God but as divided against himself; therefore, reunification of self can set him right again. The physical element, especially the sense of touch, is necessary in attaining the spiritual, and man must progress from innocence down through experience and reach for the four-fold vision through the "Imagination, the Divine Vision." Basic to the poet's mythology is the idea that without contraries there can be no progression, and the passive must exist as well as the active. Both the Devourer and Prolific, reason and energy, are necessary to the Whole, and Blake, never intending for these entities to merge, advocates that each must retain its own identity.

Such an extensive amount of serpent imagery appears in Blake's poetry that, time permitting, one could easily devote a lengthy discussion to this subject alone. Oftentimes he emphasizes the snake's visual appeal, clothing him in brilliant jewels rather than his own natural

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<sup>6</sup>William Blake, "Jerusalem," The Portable Blake (New York, 1946), p. 460.



skin, and representing him as fiery and violent in movement. "To Nobodaddy" includes a sensuous, greedy serpent. Considering the reptile as evil, Blake portrays man as a serpent lusting for power and other materialistic possessions. Viewing nature as barren without man's presence, the poet finds no spiritual value in nature and sees her as having the deceptive qualities of a serpent.

Throughout his work, this visionary, who deplores any kind of unfair restraint and authority, uses the serpent primarily to symbolize these evils and all aspects of rationalism and materialism and to illustrate the conflict between the spiritual and physical, imagination and reason. In Jerusalem, the serpent, among other things, represents the inability of reason alone to perceive spiritual truth. When man depends totally on reason as a guide, then he makes no spiritual progression and is held within the grasp of a beguiling reptile. In the following lines, the poet condemns the various philosophical and scientific ideas of the past that retain Albion, Blake's Eternal Man, in a lower state of existence:

O Divine Spirit! sustain me on thy wings,  
That I may awake Albion from his long and cold repose!  
For Bacon and Newton, sheath'd in dismal steel, their  
    terrors hang  
Like iron scourages over Albion. Reasonings like  
    vast Serpents  
Infold around my limbs, bruising my minute articulations.<sup>7</sup>

Here, the serpent is associated with "iron scourages" and in The Book of Los, with an "iron chain," both symbols of selfish and greedy restriction of mankind.

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<sup>7</sup>William Blake, Complete Poetry and Prose (London, 1927), I, 15, 9-13, p. 449. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.



Recognizing the necessity of the senses as a means to a greater whole, the Romantics naturally opposed the eighteenth-century empiricists who valued sense experience as an end in itself, and lines from Jerusalem picture man in a serpent condition, crawling on the ground in a mere attempt to gratify his senses rather than seeking something beyond this mundane world through his intuitive imaginative power:

Ah! shut in narrow doleful form,  
 Creeping in reptile flesh, upon the bosom of the ground!  
 The Eye of Man, a little narrow orb clos'd up & dark,  
 Scarcely beholding the Great Light, conversing with  
     the ground;  
 The Ear, a little shell, in small volutions shutting  
     out  
 True Harmonies, & comprehending great as very small;  
 The Nostrils, bent down to the earth & clos'd with  
     senseless flesh,  
 That odours cannot them expand, nor joy on them exult;  
 The Tongue, a little moisture fills, a little food  
     it cloys,  
 A little sound it utters, & cries are faintly heard.  
(II, 49-58)

Finally, one of the most prominent themes which pervades Blake's poetry from Songs of Innocence and Experience through his Prophetic Works is hatred of king and priest, or of any tyrant who prevents the individual from reaching his ultimate potential. Lines from The French Revolution describe a king greedily clinging to his power and surrounded by hissing snakes:

The cold newt,  
 And snake, and damp toad on the kingly foot  
     crawl, or croak on the awful knee,  
 Shedding their slime, in folds of the robe  
     the crown'd adder builds and hisses  
 From stony brows.  
(I, 11-14)

Blake refers often to priests whose dwelling places are "serpent temples" of falseness. Since the poet was opposed to a tyrannical God and

tyrannical priests representing this kind of power, in The Four Zoas he pictures one of these pretenders as a serpent; and in "I Saw A Chapel All of Gold," Blake describes the priest as a serpent attired in his finery of pearls and rubies, symbolizing the falseness of the priest who attempts to impose his will on mankind.

The spiritual force that embodies nature and offers sustenance to both body and soul varies in degree of importance to the Romantics. A common belief of the period is that dominance of the physical reduces man to a malevolent serpent, and spiritual supremacy causes man to become a non-feeling entity out of place in his worldly existence. Since one of their primary aims is the attainment of a unification of sensibilities, some poets more than others felt that the powers in nature could effect this purpose.

Their reverence for Mother Nature stems from the idea that God pervades all the earth and that even the lowly, crawling serpent shares in the natural scheme of things and is thus a necessary and sacred part of the Creation. Believing God to be present in everything from the lowest to the highest life forms, some poets felt a close spiritual relationship with all animal and plant life. The concept of primitive man living apart from materialistic, corrupt society in a secluded area where he is physically and spiritually tutored by nature pervades Wordsworth's poetry, and not until later years does he become disillusioned with this lofty theory. Even though Wordsworth does not use an extensive number of serpent images in his poetry, he does use the reptile in describing his love for all of nature; lines from The Excursion acknowledge this respect and love for all God's creatures:

Birds and beasts,  
 And the mute fish that glances in the stream,  
 And harmless reptile coiling in the sun,  
 And gorgeous insect hovering in the air,  
 The fowl domestic, and the household dog--  
 In his capacious mind, he loved them all:  
 Their rights acknowledging he felt for all.  
 (II, 41-47)

Wordsworth idealistically dreamed of a world where all things would live together in a common state of admiration, love and sympathy for one another, and in the following sonnet, "When Philoctetes in the Lemnian Isle," the poet shows Philoctetes receiving solace from the reptiles:

When Philoctetes in the Lemnian isle  
 Like a form sculptured on a monument  
 Lay couched; on him or his dread bow unbent  
 Some wild Bird oft might settle and beguile  
 The rigid features of a transient smilt,  
 Disperse the tear, or to the sigh give vent,  
 Slackening the pains of ruthless banishment  
 From his loved home, and from heroic toil.  
 And trust that spiritual Creatures round us move,  
 Grief allay which Reason cannot heal;  
 Yes, veriest reptiles have sufficed to prove  
 To fettered wretchedness, that no Bastile  
 Is deep enough to exclude the light of love,  
 Though man for brother man has ceased to feel.  
 (Vol. 3, No. XII)

Coleridge, who was exceedingly interested in the bizarre and supernatural, uses the serpent as part of a fantastic and magical creation in which he emphasizes the snake's hypnotic and evil eye. Christabel, telling of a woman's manifesting the qualities of a serpent for the purpose of hypnotizing the heroine, is an excellent example of the poet's superb imaginative power. In this narrative symbolizing the eternal struggle between good and evil, the supposedly helpless and demure Lady Geraldine soon casts a spell over the innocent and genuinely helpless Christabel. Although it is obvious that Geraldine is completely evil, the intensely mysterious atmosphere pervading the poem leads one to feel



that the true reason for such evil lies far deeper than can be imagined. The gems in her hair remind one of Blake's richly attired serpent, and the movements of her eyes, a hissing sound, and her ability to cast a spell over Christabel also reveal the malevolent serpent qualities of the beguiler.

After dreaming that a dove in the forest needs help, Bard Bracy goes to the bird's aid and finds

. . . a bright green snake  
Coiled around its wings and neck.  
Green as the herbs on which it couched,  
Close by the dove's its head it crouched;  
And with the dove it heaves and stirs,  
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!<sup>8</sup>

The dream emphasizes Geraldine's evil power, and Sir Leoline vows to kill the reptile, having associated Geraldine with the dove and her enemy with the serpent. Then, in Bard Bracy's dream Geraldine becomes the serpent:

A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy;  
And the lady's eyes they shrunk in her head,  
Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye,  
And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread,  
At Christabel she looked askance!--  
One moment--and the sight was fled!  
But Christabel in dizzy trance  
Stumbling on the unsteady ground  
Shuddered aloud, with a hissing sound;  
And Geraldine again turned round,  
And like a thing, that sought relief,  
Full of wonder and full of grief,  
She rolled her large bright eyes divine  
Wildly on Sir Leoline.

(583-596)

Under the evil influence of Geraldine's spell, the once-lovely Christabel acquires the serpent features of her foe:

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<sup>8</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1912), p. 232, ll. 549-554. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

The maid, alas! her thoughts are gone,  
 She nothing sees--no sight but one!  
 The maid, devoid of guile and sin,  
 I know not how, in fearful wise,  
 So deeply had she drunken in  
 That look, those shrunken serpent eyes,  
 That all her features were resigned  
 To this sole image in her mind:  
 And passively did imitate  
 That look of dull and treacherous hate!  
 (597-606)

For the time being anyway, evil has gained complete control, and one must resort to his imagination to determine the final outcome.

Although Coleridge usually presents the serpent as evil, the reverse is true in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner when he describes the beauty and spiritual power of the water-snakes, which in turn cause the Mariner to bless them.

Beyond the shadow of the ship,  
 I watched the water-snakes:  
 They moved in tracks of shining white;  
 And when they reared, the elfish light  
 Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship  
 I watched their rich attire:  
 Blue, glossy, green, and velvet black,  
 They coiled and swam; and every track  
 Was a flash of golden fire.  
 (IV, 272-281)

To fulfill his penance, the Mariner must forever relate his tale to others; however, by imagining the water-creatures as lovely rather than ugly and by his love of even the lowest form of life, he frees his soul and symbolizes the beauty and truth of the intuitive world.

Finally, another interesting representation of the reptile is the literary critic's definition of a "good" poem--one which has the force to move the reader from one idea to another in a pleasing and smooth manner--  
 "Like the motion of a serpent, and at every step he pauses and half

recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward."<sup>9</sup>

Byron, the rebellious and active poet of social reform, is of all the Romantic poets one whose life and personality are most significant to his work. Romantic, satirical, humorous, pessimistic, he is a poet who sheds one mood for another as easily as his serpent discards his skin; therefore, Byron employs the reptile in varied ways. For instance, "Last Words on Greece," concerned with the adder's mesmerizing eye and representing the poet as a bird helplessly bound by the reptile's influence, illustrates the profound sympathy and intense devotion for Greece which Byron felt throughout his life, and which led him to his untimely death. In The Corsair, Conrad is like a snake who may be despised but at the same time treated with respect; and the Corsair, like the poisonous serpent, may perish in his violent struggle but only after he has discharged his venom or revenge:

Man spurns the worm, but pauses ere he wake  
The slumbering venom of the folded snake:  
The first may turn, but not avenge the blow;  
The last expires, but leaves no living foe:  
Fast to the doom'd offender's form it clings,  
And he may crush-not conquer-still it stings!<sup>10</sup>

At times disillusioned and eager for retribution, Byron uses the serpent's retaliatory quality most effectively. On the other hand, in sections of Childe Harold, nature offers a peaceful refuge from society, and the reptile is part of this consolation.

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<sup>9</sup>Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>10</sup>Lord George Gordon Byron, The Complete Poetical Works of Byron (Boston, 1905), p. 342, ll. 275-80. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.



Hatred of war and any form of tyranny is a central theme in much of Byron's work, and Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice offers a comparison between a tyrannical government and the Hydra, the famous nine-headed water snake of Greek mythology. According to legend, Hercules struck off one of the Hydra's heads, and two new ones grew in its place. The middle head was immortal and resisted all of his efforts to sever it, but ultimately he solved the problem by burning the mortal heads as quickly as they grew and by burying the immortal one beneath a rock. Marino Faliero, a democratic Doge of Venice, says that the powerful aristocracy is like a Hydra, which has been allowed to endure and increase its evils of corruption. Faliero agrees to guide his people only on the condition that each Venetian will participate in his leadership,

So that nor they nor I were further slaves  
To this o'ergrown aristocratic Hydra,  
The poisonous heads of whose envenom'd body  
Have breathed a pestilence upon us all.

(I, ii, 449-451)

With the exception of Wordsworth, the Romantics often use the serpent in regard to its deceptive connotation. In his Turkish tale, The Bride of Abydos, Byron relates Zuleika's beauty to the beguiling qualities of Eve, and in Heaven and Earth, Anah is a perpetual temptation to heaven's angels:

--beautiful she is,  
The serpent's voice less subtle than her kiss.  
The snake but vanquish'd dust, but she will draw  
A second host from heaven, to break heaven's law.

(I, iii, 856-59)

One of the major issues in Cain is Lucifer's identity or real significance, and when Cain at first surmises that Lucifer is a deceptive force, the latter says that if subterfuge were his ultimate purpose, "a serpent/ Had been enough to charm ye, as before." Lucifer denies

that he was the serpent in Eden, because even though the reptile was wiser than man, he was not immortal:

. . . The snake was the snake--  
No more; and yet not less than those he tempted,  
In nature being earth also--more in wisdom  
Since he could overcome them, and foreknew  
The knowledge fatal to their narrow joys.  
Think'st thou I'd take the shape of things  
that die?

(I, i, 219-224)

Adah fears that Lucifer's encouragement of Cain's dissatisfaction with their present existence and his desire to know the truth about God, creation, and life will cause their destruction. Therefore, by choosing to follow her idea that ignorance means survival, if not complete happiness, Adah admits that man is oftentimes his own beguiler.

To various extents and with the notable exception of Blake, the Romantic poets derive a sensuous pleasure from nature's many aspects. Keats especially reveals this vivid sensuous quality in his poetry. Since Keats is concerned primarily with the idealistic, the mythological, and the sensual, the serpent with its legendary significance, movement, and color is an exceedingly suitable symbol for his poetry. In Endymion, Glaucus describes Circe's evil serpent power that imprisons others as well as himself. In this same poem Keats also uses the snake to symbolize rejuvenation, for Glaucus will leave his past life behind and look forward to new existence just as the reptile sheds its old skin:

O Jove! I shall be young again, be young!  
O shell-borne Neptune, I am pierc'd and stung  
With new-born life! What shall I do?  
Where go,  
When I have cast this serpent-skin of woe?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Keats, Complete Poetical Works (London, 1956), p. 44, 11. 237-40. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

An exquisite illustration of the serpent symbolizing imaginative power is Lamia, which exemplifies the contrasting views of the imaginative man and one influenced solely by reason. Lycius is willingly and happily seduced by Lamia, who for him assumes the form of a loving and beautiful maiden. To the young poet she represents the energizing and creative power of the imagination, but to the philosophical Apollonius Lamia is corrupt and can offer nothing but evil. Claude Lee Finney says that "Keats believed that the chief function of the imagination is to understand and to represent the instincts, the passions, and the thoughts of human beings. Lamia has this imaginative insight into human nature and she has, in particular, intuitive knowledge of love."<sup>12</sup> Even though the lovely enchantress beseeches Apollonius to remain silent, his analytical reasoning and dogmatic assertion of opinion wipes away all delusion; she vanishes, and with her the poet's imaginative existence. In this instance, Keats exploits the incongruity between appearance and reality by using a symbol often considered evil but which actually represents virtue and beauty.

By the time of the Romantic period, the serpent with its varied physical characteristics had accumulated a vast amount of symbolical significance, which offered the Romantic poets an exceedingly versatile means for expressing their aims and ideas. Paramount in their thoughts are intense condemnation of eighteenth-century dogma and empiricism, abhorrence of nineteenth-century social evils, general sympathy with the common man, and belief in the spiritual power of nature. Associated with

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<sup>12</sup>Claude Lee Finney, The Evolution of Keats Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), p. 699.



all aspects of these various conceptions is the Romantics' ultimate purpose of achievement--a unification of sensibilities. Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Keats all draw on the mythological, religious, and literary connotations that have been associated with the serpent since the beginning of civilization, and more than any single literary tradition, the Romantic period makes prolific use of the serpent's diversified symbolical meaning.

### CHAPTER III

#### SHELLEY'S SERPENT IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

Unlike Blake's gem-clad reptile, Shelley's serpent represents attributes of good and evil, which include such antitheses as imagination and reason, creation and destruction, reality and appearance, freedom and persecution, and permanence and mutability. Shelley's employment of the symbol to represent opposites accounts for his abundant use of serpent imagery and symbolism and its extensive range of meaning from the lowest sensual aspect to the ultimate concept of eternity. This all-encompassing usage is in itself significant of the supreme idea that underlies the poet's entire canon--that man groveling sensually through his worldly existence does have the innate capacity to reach for the summit of perfection.

For purposes of discussion, this study is divided into the following sections: the serpent as an actual creature of nature, either showing his relationship to fellow creatures and inanimate objects in the universe or using him for descriptive detail; evil, including images representative of lust, falseness, murder, reason, slander, and tyranny; good, depicting images illustrative of imagination, universal harmony, rejuvenation, and eternity.

Other significant methods of classification are those presented, for example, according to such subject matter as religion, mythology, and sex, or according to sense perception, as is well illustrated by Glenn O'Malley's Shelley and Synesthesia and in part by Richard Fogle's

The Imagery of Keats and Shelley. However, I have selected the prior-mentioned grouping because seemingly it permits a more inclusive range of discussion, which appears mandatory in any study of Shelley's poetry, since there is extensive diversification.

There are numerous instances in which Shelley relates the serpent, snake, viper, or reptile to other living or inanimate objects or uses him to enforce descriptive detail. A few examples are sufficient to illustrate this usage. "The Sensitive Plant" beautifully exemplifies through nature's cyclic changes Shelley's concept of mutability and the permanence of reality. In the changeable world, man and natural phenomena reproduce, live, and die, but in the ideal, real world, the poet says, "death itself must be/ Like all the rest, a mockery." The lovely garden tended by the loving hand of the Lady thrives in the summer and spring of existence; however, in the winter, it decays and weeps at the death of its caretaker. What once was life's happy playground becomes a burial ground for the dead. In one of many vivid and sensuous descriptions of the garden, Shelley compares the color of the weeds' coarse leaves to the water-snake:

Between the time of the wind and the snow  
All loathliest weeds began to grow,  
Whose coarse leaves were splashed with many a speck,  
Like the water-snake's belly and the toad's back.  
(50-54)

In a most effective image of sound and motion appearing in Alastor, Shelley compares the bow of a boat helplessly tossed about on life's turbulent waters to a serpent's neck within "a vulture's grasp." The following lines illustrate the struggle between serpent and bird that appears several times in the poet's work and which will be discussed in later analysis:



Along the dark and ruffled waters fled  
 The straining boat.--A whirlwind swept it on,  
 With fierce gusts and precipitating force,  
 Through the white ridges of the chafed sea.  
 The waves arose. Higher and higher still  
 Their fierce necks writhed beneath the tempest's scourge  
 Like serpents struggling in a vulture's grasp.  
 (320-325)

The tempestuous sea, representing life's constant trials, attempts to overpower the vessel just as a vulture might grasp a struggling serpent, and one can easily hear and see the treacherous waves lashing at the boat in an effort to destroy it.

Still another powerful and impressive comparison of the snake with an object or force in nature occurs in "Mont Blanc," when "The glaciers creep/ Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains." Throughout this poem, Shelley is concerned with the Power behind man and believes that real knowledge of God cannot be conceived by man. This idea, of course, foreshadows Demogorgon's words in Prometheus Unbound that "the deep truth is imageless." However, in this earlier poem, Shelley is emphasizing the fact that organized religion, pretending to know and in turn to represent God, merely succeeds in distorting man's ideas, thereby causing him to develop false conceptions. God is not a vengeful force toward man, but merely indifferent, and lines preceding the serpent image express the poet's idea that "Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,/ Remote, serene, and inaccessible." However, Shelley goes on to say that the Power from which to gain strength is there, if man will but seek its energy. Again, this same idea continues in Prometheus, since man must activate Demorgorgon's power, either for good or evil, as the latter will never be the instigator.

There are many, many examples of Shelley's use of the serpent for descriptive detail. For instance, he recognizes the beauty of the snake in Rosalind and Helen as it floats on the "dark and lucid flood in the light of his own loveliness." In Adonais, Shelley describes the "green lizard and the golden snake like unimprisoned flames out of their trance awake," and in The Witch of Atlas he pictures "the sly serpent, in the golden flame of his own volumes interolved."

On the other hand, in The Cenci the poet associates the reptile with the ugliness of evil in Beatrice's Gothic description of her horrid and woeful condition:

I thought I was that wretched Beatrice  
Men speak of, whom her father sometimes haies  
From hall to hall by the entangled hair;  
At others, pens up naked in damp cells  
Where scaly reptiles crawl, and starves her there,  
Till she will eat strange flesh.

(III, i, 43-48)

In "Fragment: A Serpent-Face," Shelley describes a man's face as resembling a snake's skin--"wrinkled and loose/ And withered"; and another very interesting example of the viper as representative of descriptive detail is one that is technically out of position in this study section, since it offers so much additional connotation concerning Shelley's Gothic inclination, in addition to expressing a basic concept of the Romantic tradition. However, forsaking arbitrary classification for the moment anyway, I shall briefly mention this noteworthy reference. Related to the Romanticists' awareness of the discrepancy between appearance and reality is the notion that beauty is directly involved with suffering, and Shelley illustrates this "pleasure pain" theory in "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery," in which he associates the often-despised serpent with beauty. "Its horror

and its beauty are divine," and

Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror;  
 For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare  
 Kindled by that inextricable error,  
 Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air  
 Become a live and ever-shifting mirror  
 Of all the beauty and the terror there--  
 A woman's countenance, with serpent-locks,  
 Gazing in death on Heaven from those wet rocks.  
 (33-40)

In these lines and elsewhere in the poem, the description of the vipers offers vivid sensual appeal; however, the serpent contributes to a larger symbolical reference since it also signifies the real meaning of the Medusa. The Medusa's ultimate significance is not merely the result of her apparent beauty but the final emotional effect gained from both her grace and the pain resulting from the agonizing serpents.

Although Shelley and his contemporaries were concerned with the reptile's descriptive attributes, they placed much more emphasis on its symbolic aspect. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, conditions in society (child-labor, the Napoleonic wars, and general suppression of the common man) caused the Romantic poets to seek a better world for mankind through active reform and, more significant, through the creation of a mythological and ideal spiritual world. In fact, the entire literary tradition is a protest, a rebellion, against the materialism of the preceding century, with its emphasis on analytic reason and empiricism. Since these ideas dealt only with the physical world of perception, the Romantics endeavored to unite this tangible world with the spiritual and, thus, aim for the supreme unification of the Whole. In their poetry and prose, these poets pointed out certain ideas and conditions currently existing in humanity that hindered the



process of unification by fostering antagonism between the spiritual and the physical, intuition and reason, and similar antitheses.

One means by which Shelley condemns these evils of his time is by use of the serpent's various physical attributes and the evil qualities associated with his history and nature. He employs the symbol to represent sensuality, man's antagonism toward his fellow man, and institutional tyranny over mankind.

Sensuality stresses the excessive value that man places on the lustful pursuit of wealth and physical satisfaction. Of course, sensuousness combined with the spiritual is the condition of mankind most admired by the Romantics, but the appearance of a purely sensual nature is considered a lowly existence and persistently condemned by these poets.

The Gothic propensity of Shelley's mind, originating with such childhood creations as those of sea-serpents and the like, are discussed in numerous biographical accounts, and this same quality in some of his poetry contributes grotesque images symbolizing materialistic concepts. In Prometheus Unbound, the reptile more vividly enhances this scene of ruin and desolation:

The wrecks beside of many a city vast,  
Whose population which the earth grew over  
Was mortal, but not human; see, they lie,  
Their monstrous works, and uncouth skeletons,  
Their statues, homes and fanes; prodigious shapes  
Huddled in gray annihilation, split,  
Jammed in the hard, black deep; and over these,  
The anatomies of unknown winged things,  
And fishes which were isles of living scale,  
And serpents, bony chains, twisted around  
The iron crags, or within heaps of dust  
To which the tortuous strength of their last pangs  
Had crushed the iron crags;

(IV, 296-308)

The mythological Iron Age of the Greeks represented all conceivable aspects of materialism--violence, lust, and the excessive compulsion for worldly possessions reigned foremost in the minds of men. All the earth reflected a complete chaos of wickedness, and in a Gothic description of waste and destruction, Panthea pictures the materialistic domain of Jupiter. The serpent associated with iron, torture, chains, and dust symbolizes the base ideas of greed, violence, persecution, and corruption of every sort. However, with the regeneration of Prometheus through love, all Earth returns to her former state of grace, and good triumphs, at least for the present time, over Jupiter's evil. The spiritual, idealistic world reigns over the materialistic one.

Another example of the serpent's association with mankind's greedy nature, but one in which the serpent represents a stern and unyielding conscience in contrast to his evil role, appears in Queen Mab. Having transported the virtuous spirit of Ianthe far from earth's corruption, Queen Mab shows her man's past and present existence and the possibility of mankind's achieving a Utopian future. While recounting the innumerable materialistic evils that have thus far prevented man's attainment of apocolypse, Mab stresses power and wealth, which some men use against others to attain their own selfish desires. Shelley has her especially berate a king, "the wearer of a gilded chain/ That binds his soul to abjectness," who deprives his numerous subjects of life's physical and spiritual nourishment. On one occasion, he falls on his luxurious couch in a restless drunken sleep, as "conscience, that undying serpent calls/ Her venomous brood to their nocturnal task." The serpent conscience and her helpers torment the king so much that in desperation he prays for tranquillity of his "fevered brain," which inevitably

results in his poverty. In addition, it is interesting to note that Shelley makes reference to the serpent conscience as illustrative of the female principle.

When man, through excessive self-concern, abandons the love of his fellow man in greedy pursuit of power, and reason and senses alone overcome his potentially divine attributes, then he begins to oppose anyone and anything who gets in his way. Describing these base qualities of man in opposition to other men, Shelley employs various and numerous snake images. Frequency is so great that in a close study of Shelley's poetry, when one comes across lines having to do with ill of any consequence, he automatically expects the serpent to make his customary appearance. For instance, Beatrice's song symbolizes the serpent's treachery in The Cenci. Shelley's concern with good and evil is paramount in his canon, and in this dramatic work, he shockingly portrays to its fullest extent the greedy condonation of wickedness by the established Church, one of the poet's favorite objects of attack. The implication is that had the Church not been an institution of greed and deceit, Count Cenci would have had no support for his villainy, and vice-versa. On the other hand, Shelley represents in this work, as in others, one of his major ideas--that Evil cannot corrupt when the human will does not permit it to do so. In Act V, Beatrice feels that she has been condemned unjustly and is especially bereaved because of her personal betrayal, in addition to the world's unfair justice. She sings the following song to her "false friend," who is obviously Orsino; however, in a more universal conception, these lines might just as easily refer to the evil nature of mankind:



False friend, wilt thou smile or weep  
 When my life is laid asleep?  
 Little cares for a smile or a tear,  
 The clay-cold corpse upon the bier!  
 Farewell! Heigho!  
 What is this whispers low?  
 There is a snake in thy smile, my dear;  
 And bitter poison within thy tear.  
 (130-137)

Although the friend pretends otherwise, the serpent falseness appears in his smile, and the snake's poison mingles with his tears.

In an image concerning traitorous murder from The Revolt of Islam, "rabid snakes" represent slaves who slay men in their sleep who have tried to help them, and

Those sanguine slaves amid ten thousand dead  
 Stabbed in their sleep, trampled in treacherous war  
 The gentle hearts whose power their lives had sought to spare.

Like rabid snakes, that sting some gentle child  
 Who brings them food, when winter false and fair  
 Allures them forth with its cold smiles, so wild  
 They rage among the camp;--they overbear  
 The patriot hosts--confusion, then despair  
 (V, vii, 1771-1778)

These men returning savagery for good picture a brutal antagonism among men which assumes barbaric and horrifying proportions when treacherous hatred is given in exchange for consideration, sympathy, and love.

Certainly not so serious in one respect as the slaughter of humanity, but all the same an illustration of the antagonism man feels in his heart for another appears in "Ginevra." This poem tells about a bride who has unhappily spoken false vows of love to someone other than Antonio, whom she genuinely loves. Leaving her wedding celebration, Ginevra meets her former lover in the garden, and from her grief-stricken heart she speaks the following words. The "stings and venom" of the viper symbolize any false, materialistic reason that frustrates love's possibility:

'Friend, if earthly violence or ill,  
 Suspicion, doubt, or the tyrannic will  
 Of parents, chance or custom, time or change,  
 Or circumstances, or terror, or revenge,  
 Or wildered looks, or words, or evil speech,  
 With their stings and venom, can impeach  
 Our love,--we love not: if the grave which hides  
 The victim from the tyrant, and divides  
 The cheek that whitens from the eyes that dart  
 Imperious inquisition to the heart  
 That is another's, could dissever ours,  
 We love not.'

(58-69)

Ginevra then removes the "golden circle" from her finger, and her words of undying love to Antonio foreshadow what is to come--'Accept this token of my faith,/ The pledge of vows to be absolved by death;/ And I am dead or shall be soon.'

Another interesting example of the serpent as illustrative of man's enmity toward his fellow man deals with literary criticism. Critics have been a persistent bother to poets during most every literary period; and in fact, just prior to the Romanticists, Pope had composed his verse Essay, for one reason, as an attempt to bring about reconciliation between poet and critic, whom he advises to look to the Ancients, who lived in a time of harmony among writers of both groups. However, with their lofty conceptions of idealism, the Romantic poets were perhaps naturally more sensitive to the criticism of men who, chiefly guided by their "meddling intellects," were presumptuous enough to judge the creations of those whose imaginations soared far above them. This association between the reptile and critic occurs several times in Adonais, Shelley's tribute to Keats and condemnation of the critics who had defamed the poet:

'The sun comes forth, and many reptiles spawn;  
 He sets, and each ephemeral insect then  
 Is gathered into death without a dawn,

And the immortal stars awake again;  
 So is it in the world of living men:  
 A godlike mind soars forth, in its delight  
 Making earth bare and veiling heaven, and when  
 It sinks, the swarms that dimmed or shared its light  
 Leave to its kindred lamps the spirit's awful night.'  
 (xxix, 253-261)

Convinced, although wrongly so, that the denunciation of Endymion had hastened the young poet's death, Shelley demonstrates his scorn for the critics by comparing them with serpents and dragons who wait for a chance to attack the poet.

Shelley speaks of his wife, Mary, in the beginning lines of The Witch of Atlas as "critic-viper bitten" when she had accused the poem of lacking basic human interest. Mrs. Shelley had often expressed a desire for her husband to write about more down-to-earth subjects rather than those of imaginative vision, yet this would have been as impossible for Shelley to do as to become the serpent that he wrote about.

Believing that the individual must exercise his intuitive power in transcending the physical world to achieve harmonious relationship with the universe, the Romantics were adamantly opposed to any external restraint or restriction that diverts man or prevents his ultimate attainment of this spiritual goal. Stressing the necessity of individual freedom in a manner similar to Blake, Shelley often associates with snakes the enemies of liberty, particularly kings, priests, and any tyrants who place unfair restraints on mankind. Actually, the relationship of reptile and king began with the mythological Zeus, who along with other legendary kings, frequently assumed the forms of serpents as one means of gaining power over others and accomplishing their selfish ends. Nevertheless, Shelley considered all these forms of tyranny deceptive and treacherous like the snake, for in The Revolt of Islam



the loathesome tyrant called together the kings and priests who "knew his cause their own and swore/ Like wolves and serpents to their mutual wars/ Strange truce."

Sympathy with the suppressed common man is of course a fundamental thesis in Romantic doctrine, and in "Ode to Liberty" Shelley condemns man's persecutors--tyrant, king, and priest alike--and describes their tortuous methods. He distinguishes between the useless god of false institutional religion and the loving God who actually rules the universe. Shelley calls on Liberty to come forth from man's spirit with Wisdom, Love, and Hope, and these lines clearly express the poet's absolute hatred of monarchs:

Oh, that the free would stamp the impious name  
 Of king into the dust! or write it there,  
 So that this blot upon the page of fame  
 Were as a serpent's path, which light air  
 Erases, and the flat sands close behind!  
 Ye the oracle have heard:  
 Lift the victory-flashing sword,  
 And cut the snaky knots of this foul gordian word,  
 Which, weak itself as stubble, yet can bind  
 Into a mass, irrefragably firm,  
 The axes and the rods which awe mankind;  
 The sound has poison in it, 'tis the sperm  
 Of what makes life foul, cankerous, and abhorred;  
 Disdain not thou, at thine appointed term,  
 To set thine armed heel on this reluctant worm.  
 (xv, 210-225)

Shelley implores freedom's supporters to "stamp the impious name of king into the dust" by writing it in sand, so it will vanish as easily as the path made by a serpent disappears with merely a light stir of air. As the sands forever close over the trail of the viper, so shall liberty forever bury the king's evil tyranny over men. Although lacking a serpent reference, this same idea of king and sand appears in "Ozymandias," no doubt symbolizing the fact that the king has built a

solely materialistic monument rather than an ideal spiritual one. The shifting and insecure foundation upon which his monument stands further implies that in time it will decay because it lacks real value. Finally, even though the title, king, is "weak itself as stubble, . . . the sound has poison in it" because it still possesses the reptile force to create terror among its subjects.

Because Shelley believed that man possessed the innate capacity to establish his own relationship with God, one of his primary ideas is that orthodox religion merely serves to impose upon the individual limited and false interpretations concerning the Divine Power. In all his poetry dealing with this religious aspect, Shelley condemns the falseness of established doctrine and its priestly representatives. This is an organic theme in The Cenci, and in Rosalind and Helen the poet associates organized religion called "Faith" with the Python. Helen speaks of the Christian Faith which, like the "blood-stained but undefeated Python," continues to crawl among "the wailing tribes of human kind, trampling and deceiving them again and again."

Finally, "The Mask of Anarchy" exemplifies Shelley's advanced attitude toward the evil effects of anarchy. From the outcome of the French Revolution, the poet had learned that violent rebellion against persecution and evil does not necessarily ensure freedom, as revolutionists more often than not become as tyrannous as their predecessors. Thus, Shelley became disillusioned with violent reaction and advocated a more peaceful and surer method of attaining freedom. Recommending passive resistance, the poet says that workers must have more patience and understanding of one another's difficulties. However, the principal blame for anarchy he places not on the rebels, but on the corrupt

leaders who cause the rebellion. He sees Anarchy as the fourth Horseman, preceded by Murder, Fraud, and Hypocrisy, and in the following image Shelley depicts Anarchy as a snake under the feet of Tyranny:

To the rich thou art a check  
When his foot is on the neck  
Of his victim, thou dost make  
That he treads upon a snake.

(vi, 225-29)

A victim pushed too far by tyrannous persecution is like a snake that will strike back when he is stepped upon. Thus, when the tyrant becomes so concerned with his own seemingly good fortune, he fails to recognize the signs of approaching revolution.

A primary aim of the Romantic tradition is to achieve a reconciliation of body and spirit. Throughout his prose and poetry, Shelley advocates the necessity of the intuitive imagination in transcending the physical world to perceive that of spiritual insight. By using the serpent more traditionally associated with sensual aspects, also as a symbol dealing with the poetic imagination, harmony in the universe, benevolence, rejuvenation, and eternity, Shelley exemplifies a basic concept of his tradition--that appearances or any sense impressions alone are deceiving and that behind this external veiling exist truth, beauty, and goodness.

Although the snake-eagle image occurs in several of Shelley's poems, in Alastor it is directly associated with the poetic imagination and represents an energizing force. Shelley uses the struggle between reptile and bird most effectively in picturing the frustrated poet searching for his Ideal Love, the veiled maid:

While daylight held  
The sky, the Poet kept mute conference  
With his still soul. At night the passion came,



Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream,  
 And shook him from his rest, and led him forth  
 Into the darkness.--As an eagle grasped  
 In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast  
 Burn with the poison, and precipitates  
 Through night and day, tempest, and calm, and cloud,  
 Frantic with dizzying anguish, her blind flight  
 O'er the wide aery wilderness: thus driven  
 By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,  
 Beneath the cold glare of the desolate night,  
 Through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells,  
 Startling with careless step the moonlight snake,  
 He fled.

(223-237)

As the serpent in this image signifies among other things a sensual nature, it is representative of man's passions; however, it is important to recall that Shelley, as did his contemporaries, insisted upon feeling and emotion as necessary guidelines to the ultimate Ideal. The veiled maiden illustrates Shelley's concept of Intellectual Beauty, for whom he was to continually seek throughout his short life and repeatedly find as represented by various women, a poet, and finally, as a city in Hellas. Earlier in the poem, an Arab maid has fallen in love with the poet, who does not return affection because he feels no spiritual kinship with the girl. Instead, his dream of truth and virtue, the veiled maiden, who disappears as quickly as she had come to his imagination, causes him to spend his days in search of her. Just as the eagle flies dizzily and blindly through space as a result of the serpent's poisonous grasp, the poet, overcome with obsessive desire for the maiden, rushes blindly "through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells" in search of his Ideal. While the eagle flees from her captor, the poet attempts to recapture the lovely dream in which he was enfolded in his beloved's arms. Perhaps the snake's green coloring represents not only the serpent's poisonous venom but also the poet's obsessive desire to recapture his soulmate.

In "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," Shelley both acknowledges the infrequent and transitory presence of the Ideal and affirms the importance to the soul of even this temporary visitation. Even though Alastor concludes in utter hopelessness, the poet's choice of existence seems to be a better alternative to that of the baser spirit who attempts no imaginative achievement and is destined "to burn at the socket."

Ideas of good and evil were a constant concern to Shelley, who believed that only a very thin partition separates the struggling opponents and that this veil could easily be removed simply "by man's will to do so"; the heart of man resorts to his innate goodness and pursues the intuitive Ideal. Therefore, Shelley uses the serpent, frequently associated with evil, also to symbolize various aspects of goodness--universal harmony, rejuvenation, and eternity. The poet's inversion of a symbol that his contemporaries more often than not linked with evil seemingly has to do with Shelley's strong sympathy for society's oppressed and outcast. By elevating the lowly, crawling reptile to lofty stature, the poet symbolizes his desire for mankind's full achievement of dignity. A.T. Strong also attributes this usage to the "social and legal injustice which the poet conceived himself to have undergone."<sup>1</sup> In addition, one must keep in mind the fact that Shelley disliked any stereotyped forms and images of morality, and the serpent with multiple significance is an excellent means for the poet's illustrating one of his central themes: the incongruity between appearance and reality.

Shelley's fully developed and organic use of the serpent as the Spirit of Good occurs in The Revolt of Islam, a lengthy narrative in

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<sup>1</sup>A.T. Strong, Three Studies in Shelley (Hamdon, Conn., 1968), p. 80.



which the eagle represents the Spirit of Evil. In Canto I, the snake-eagle aerial battle, impetus for the entire story, foreshadows the ideas and action of the remaining eleven cantos. The day-long "touch and go" combat between the reptile and bird symbolizes the ceaselessly alternating powers of good and evil forces that pervade the world for all time, and the main events in the poem illustrate how each force gains supremacy from time to time over its adversary. When the battle temporarily ends during the first canto, the eagle flies wearily but victoriously away, and the Good Spirit catapults into the sea. However, the narrator discovers that a woman has rescued the struggling serpent from the destructive water and is nursing the wounded reptile. As they sail away together, the woman tells the poet about the two powers that influence mankind: "The serpent is the Morning Star, changed by his victorious foe, the Red Comet, from starry shape, beauteous and mild, to a dire snake, with man and beast unreconciled." He is the principle of Good, and the comet, "whose name is legion," is the embodiment of "Death, Decay, Earthquake and Blight and Madness pale, . . . Fear, Hatred, Faith and Tyranny."<sup>2</sup> The evil spirit assumes the eagle's shape since

The darkness lingering o'er the dawn of things,  
Was Evil's breath and life; this made him strong  
To soar aloft with overshadowing wings.

However, the Spirit of Good in his changed form

did creep among  
The nations of mankind, and every tongue  
Cursed and blasphemed him as he passed; for none  
Knew good from evil.

Again and again, the snake and eagle renew their battle, which symbolizes the conflict of mankind against its oppressors of freedom, justice, and

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 81.



truth. Although at the beginning of the poem evil has once again over-  
come good,

The victor Fiend,  
Omnipotent of yore, now quails, and fears  
His triumph dearly won, which soon will lend  
An impulse swift and sure to his approaching end.<sup>3</sup>

The eagle flies swiftly over the earth, casting ominous shadows with its wings, and the serpent creeps over the ground, slowly but surely spreading eventual good. Of course, the major difficulty seems to be that few men could recognize the difference between Good and Evil. Perhaps one answer lies in the contrast between the rapid motion of evil and the slow movement of good: evil spreads more quickly than good, and man is again deceived by appearances.

Elsewhere in the poem, Shelley does represent the serpent as a genuine symbol of evil. For example, in the breast of the Iberian priest "Did hate and guile lie watchful, intertwined/ Twin serpents in one deep and winding nest," and reptiles are a decorative part of the torture couch on which the lovers are to die. A.T. Strong makes a noteworthy comment for summary of this discussion, saying that "The whole tragedy of the Morning Star is that he has been doomed to assume a form which is commonly and naturally associated with the evil and outcast. Shelley, in giving him this shape, wishes not only to awaken pity for him, but to exalt an object commonly regarded with contempt, and to show that it too has its part in the universal spirit and shall therefore share in the beneficence of the new order."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 82-83.

Shelley's serpent images referring to universal love exemplify the poet's ultimate hopes and aspirations for mankind. Harmony exists among all aspects of nature, and all creatures live in perfect relationship with one another. Queen Mab illustrates in detail all the past and present evils in the world, mankind's oppression of others, and a condition which has even had corruptive influence on Mother Nature. In the poem's final section, when Shelley describes the future possibilities of a Utopian existence for man, a beautiful physical change has come over the earth also.

And fragrant zephyrs there from spicy isles  
 Ruffle the placid ocean-deep, that rolls  
 Its broad, bright surges to the sloping sand,  
 Whose roar is wakened into echoings sweet  
 To murmur through the Heaven-breathing groves  
 And melodize with man's blest nature there.

(VIII, 64-69)

Included in this vision of harmony is an image describing the comradeship between a "babe" and the basilisk, a reptile so poisonous that his breath, or very glance, was considered fatal. Yet, in Shelley's idealistic conception

Sloping and smooth the daisy-spangled  
 lawn,  
 Offering sweet incense to the sunrise,  
 smiles  
 To see a babe before his mother's  
 door,  
 Sharing his morning's meal  
 With the green and golden basilisk  
 That comes to lick his feet.

(VIII, 82-87)

All aspects of nature express mutual admiration: the grass sends forth a sweet fragrance to greet the sunrise; the dewy lawn glistens or smiles to see the tender feeling between the babe and serpent, and nature's fresh green and warm gold coloring portray the earth's tranquillity and pleasure.

In "Epipsychidion," "The spirit of the worm beneath the sod/ In love and worship blends itself with God," and during the drama of Prometheus, Asia speaks of the powerful force of love, which, symbolized by the serpent, maintains that all God's creatures enjoy a necessary role in the natural scheme of things:

Thy words are sweeter than aught else but his  
 Whose echoes they are: yet all love is sweet,  
 Given or returned. Common as light is love,  
 And its familiar voice wearies not ever.  
 Like the wide heaven, the all-sustaining air,  
 It makes the reptile equal to the God:  
 They who inspire it most are fortunate,  
 As I am now; but those who feel it most  
 Are happier still, after long sufferings,  
 As I shall soon become.

(II, v, 38-42)

Even though Shelley often employs this usual interpretation of inherent love among earth's creatures, he also offers a slight deviation from the more traditional theory. For instance, the serpent and other animals become Marenghi's companions only after he tames them: "Nor was his state so lone as you might think./ He had tamed every newt, and snake and toad." Along with Shelley's conceptions of an idealistic universe is this more realistic notion of domesticating the animal prior to its harmonious existence with other creatures. However, domestication may also further suggest that through love man, as well as beast, achieves a spiritual kind of domestication. The beautiful, kind, and delightfully mischievous Witch of Atlas tames the animals' savage natures, and then they all have mutual respect and feeling for one another.

And first the spotted cameleopard came,  
 And then the wise and fearless elephant;  
 Then the sly serpent, in the golden flame  
 Of his own volumes interwolved;--all gaunt  
 And sanguine beasts her gentle looks made tame.  
 (91-95)



Ideas of time and eternity, symbolizing mutability and permanence, pervade Shelley's poetry, and the serpent plays a prominent part in these conceptions. "Associated with the snake's symbolic value as a life-giving force is its habit of periodically shedding its skin, and this physical characteristic in addition to the extensive longevity which some reptiles attain further suggests regular purification and immortality."<sup>5</sup> No doubt, Shelley relies upon ancient literary tradition, of which he was an avid and persistent devotee, in his use of the serpent to symbolize rejuvenation. A likely source may have been Ovid's Metamorphoses, in which the Latin poet pictures Hercules in the process of becoming a god like his father, Jove, but at the same time discarding all qualities inherited from his mother: "He kept traces of his father; and as a serpent, its old age sloughed off with its skin, revels in fresh life, and shines resplendent in its bright new scales . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Occasionally Shelley uses the serpent for a symbol of rejuvenation, and in the conclusion of Hellas this representation of the snake appears when the chorus says,

The world's great age begins anew,  
The golden years return,  
The earth doth like a snake renew  
Her wintry weeds outworn.  
(1060-1063)

These lines refer to the return of the "golden years" of Liberty; just as the snake rids itself of an outworn skin, the earthly realm and all its creatures renew themselves in the spring of the year when freedom

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<sup>5</sup>Lura Pedrini and Duilio T. Pedrini, Serpent Imagery and Symbolism (New Haven, 1966), p. 52.

<sup>6</sup>Ovid, Metamorphoses (London, 1928), ll. 21-23.

triumphs over tyranny and oppression disappears. Here, Shelley relates the seasons' cyclic changes to aspects of human affairs. Hope is for eternal spring, but as nature's attributes repeatedly vary, so does man's existence. Thus, the idea of impermanence is always present in the physical world and is Shelley's cause for man's reliance on the intuitive faculty and his innate qualities of goodness to sustain him during the dark periods of winter's evils. This relationship between seasonal change and man's life is a primary theme in "Ode to the West Wind," Adonais, and Prometheus Unbound, and one that the poet continually returns to throughout his work.

Related to the serpent as a symbol of rejuvenation are images referring to immortality and eternity, and relative to this symbolical concept of the serpent in Shelley's poetry are several ancient snake emblems. One of the earliest symbols known to man is the mystic hieroglyph of the serpent swallowing its own tail, a figure signifying Eternity because it is without beginning or end. Another pertains to the amphisbaenic snake, the fabled serpent with a head at each end of its body that had the ability to move in either direction. In his study dealing with the "encircled serpent," Howey points out that the serpent shown as a circle, representative of the eternity of God, is a subtle emblem of immortality. "Even if we regard it still as a viper it can now be thought of as destroying itself by its own venom, and seen thus, it symbolizes the suicide of Death."<sup>7</sup> Pictured as a destroyer of death by its own poison, the snake represents immortality, and this complete

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<sup>7</sup>M. Oldfield Howey, The Encircled Serpent (New York, 1955), p. 226.

and never-ending circle became a symbol of the Platonic idea that appears in Adonais: "The One remains, the many change and pass."

In her Note on Prometheus Unbound, Mary Shelley says, "The subject which he loved best to dwell on was the image of One warring with the Evil Principle," and since this is a fundamental theme in the poem, the snake appears several times as representative of the One. During his detailed study of the drama, Wasserman distinguishes between various meanings concerning the traditional circle emblem that portrays Eternity as a figure surrounded by the snake holding its tail in its mouth.

"Whereas the amphisbaenic snake represents the retention of the perfect present during the course of moving time, the circular serpent, is the emblem of the totality of time. Because mutability is the inherent condition of the natural world, eternity in that domain is the moving circle, the whole possible course of events perpetually renewing and repeating itself."<sup>8</sup> However, Shelley's references to the circled serpent of eternity occur in Demogorgon's realm of power outside of being, "not in Prometheus' realm, where eternity is the absence of time, nor in mankind's, where the models of eternity are the duration of the perfect present, the infinitude of mental awareness, and the perpetually repeated circle of the sum of time."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, both images of the circular serpent, the "doom that clasps Eternity," and the "snake-like Doom coiled underneath the Eternal's throne" lie asleep or motionless until they are activated by man. Similar examples occur in other selections

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<sup>8</sup> Earl R. Wasserman, Shelley's Prometheus Unbound: A Critical Reading (Baltimore, 1965), p. 214.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 215.



as well. In the Daemon of the World, Shelley describes Ianthe's innocence and her ability to resist worldly evils, and he praises her intuitive power that enables her to perceive truth and therefore "The flame to seize, the veil to rend/ Where the vast snake Eternity/ In charmed sleep doth ever lie." Also, "Fragment: To the Mind of Man" illustrates the intuitive power of man's mind to spread over the world "the vital flame of truth," whose light "charmed the lids/ Of the vast snake Eternity, who kept/ The tree of good and evil."

Fuller explication of the drama itself will better clarify the symbolical meaning of the serpent; and even though Shelley makes varied and prolific use of serpent imagery in Prometheus Unbound, its chief association is with the poet's concepts of eternity, mutability, and permanence--elements of good and evil. Once again offering his view of how man and his world can be regenerated, Shelley illustrates through Prometheus' spiritual rebirth that mankind had only "to will that there was no evil, and there would be none." Since the Titan has participated in the evil of hate and inevitably subjected Earth as well to this fallen condition, he must, in order to redeem the world, dispell his own faults of hate and revenge. The Christian viewpoint of "loving one's enemy" immediately becomes paramount as Shelley portrays Prometheus' agonizing internal struggle to regain his state of grace and ultimately to conquer evil in the world. Love is the pathway to inner redemption; and when Prometheus, thus far existing with only partial love represented by Panthea and Ione, unites with his emanation Asia, his regeneration and that of earth will be achieved.

During this reunification, Asia, compelled by necessity and also with free assertion of will, visits the cave of Demogorgon, an

intermediary superhuman Power. Since he represents "possibility," Demogorgon's power can be used for either good or evil, depending upon the moral condition of man's mind. As Shelley has previously pointed out in "Mont Blanc," if man knows how to use this force, it is there for the taking; therefore, it can be employed for man's good if he makes the right choice. The first serpent image relevant to this discussion appears in the concluding lines of the Song of the Spirits:

Resist not the weakness  
Such strength is in meekness  
That the Eternal, the Immortal,  
Must unloose through life's portal  
The snake-like Doom coiled underneath his throne  
By that alone.  
(II, iii, 93-98)

"Demogorgon's mighty law" requires that man must seek his power, as he will not of himself intervene. In other words, "the only way in which the forces of moral good can be activated is through a regeneration in the mind of man."<sup>10</sup> Under the throne of Demogorgon, mankind's happier destiny, a "snake-like Doom" has been inertly coiled since Jupiter came into power given him by Prometheus. The temporal order of time, destined eventually to be buried by the past Hours, rules the mind rather than being ruled by it and is associated with Jupiter's tyrannical and evil supremacy.

Asia approaches the "mighty darkness filling the seat of power"; and through the supreme force of unified love in the mind of man, the Eternal Demogorgon must release the happier future of man "through life's portal." Thus, the "snake-like doom" is the release of Prometheus and

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<sup>10</sup>Carlos Baker, Shelley's Major Poetry (New York, 1961), p. 116.

the downfall of Jupiter, who sinks with Demogorgon into the vast and dark abyss. Only by such strength that exists in the meekness of love can man aspire to a higher spiritual form. The new Hours of the diviner day exemplify a kind or degree of eternity, "not in the sense of Prometheus' timelessness not in the sense of the persistence in time of the changeless present but in the sense of the indefinite capacity of the human mind's awareness."<sup>11</sup> Consequently, in human time, eternity is the state of mind in which consciousness has no set boundaries; and though complete unity exists only outside of time, the human world of mutability possesses the innate capacity to reach toward this perfect unity or Ideal. Man is forever subject to change, but through his greater existence in time because of his attributes of love and the intuitive faculty, life's time-brought difficulties and evils can be endured more easily.

During Demogorgon's brief and cryptic comments to Asia, Shelley expresses one of the drama's key ideas--that "the deep truth is imageless." This statement emphasizing mankind's limitations in his mutable world is the final answer to Asia's questions concerning God and power, good and evil. Some words are beyond understanding, and man's knowledge is quite limited and invariably cannot answer the ultimate questions that have plagued humanity since the beginning of time. Thus, Shelley deliberately makes complete translation of his symbolism impossible. By representing Demogorgon as shapeless and without form, the poet advocates the inadequacy of language in apprehending some truths. The "deep truth"

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<sup>11</sup>Wasserman, op. cit., p. 210.



cannot be put into expression conceivable to human beings, just as in "Mont Blanc" Shelley declares man's failure to ultimately understand God.

Another example of serpent symbolism dealing with eternity occurs at the conclusion of Prometheus Unbound. Offering a warning to mankind, Demogorgon says,

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,  
 These are the seals of that most firm assurance  
 Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;  
 And if with infirm hand, Eternity,  
 Mother of many acts and hours, should free  
 The serpent that would clasp her with his length;  
 These are the spells by which to reassume  
 An empire o'er the disentangled doom.  
 (IV, 562-569)

Man's darker destiny of suffering is also coiled beneath Demogorgon's throne where mankind's unfulfilled happy future used to lie. There is no promise or guarantee in this mutable world that man will never again become weak and degenerate, but if and when he does, then this "serpent doom" that waits for possible release is referring to the tyrannous kind of existence represented by Jupiter's evil. However, so long as "Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance" are attributes of man, he will be armed with the best weapons with which again to meet his evil foe.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

With its numerous historical and literary connotations acquired through the ages and its varied physical attributes, the serpent maintains a significant position in the symbolic realm, having obviously played a prominent part in mankind's affairs since the beginning of civilization. Its specific uses in the literature of many cultures, from the time of the Ancients to the present day, have been both pervasive and prolific. Especially do these characteristics of serpent symbolism apply to the literary tradition of the English Romantic poets, a most productive group of artists who made extensive use of many kinds of symbols to illustrate the supreme power of the creative imagination and to express their intense dissatisfaction with the preceding century and the social evils of their own time. This particular study specifically emphasizes and testifies to the abundance and variety of serpent imagery and symbolism in the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley.

Because of its physical characteristics, plus innumerable and meaningful religious, mythological, and past literary endowments, the serpent became a versatile implement for the Romantics' expression of primary aims and ideas. These poets endeavored to achieve a unification of sensibilities by advocating the importance both of sense perception and the spiritual aspect reached through imagination. The serpent was a useful symbol to represent diverse aspects of good and evil. Although

the Romantic poets were generally interested in the serpent's imaginative significance, they were particularly interested in its evil and sensuous qualities, since they were rebels against supremacy of either the body or spirit over the other. Therefore, they opposed sensuality alone, analytic reason, empiricism, dogmatism and any restraint of man's body or soul that restricted his progress toward ultimate achievement.

Blake created his own system of the "four-fold Vision," and from Songs of Innocence and Experience through his Prophetic Works, he probably uses as many serpent images as does Shelley. However, unlike his contemporary, Blake almost invariably emphasizes the snake's grasping and sensuous nature--the corrupt and groveling condition in humanity. Clothing his reptile in the splendor and ostentation of precious jewels and other materialistic garments, the visionary fully exploits man's serpent-like deceitful, tyrannous, and sensual qualities. Although Blake frequently uses the serpent to illustrate the inability of reason alone to perceive spiritual insight and truth, his favorite portrayal of the viper is one that symbolizes his profound hatred and condemnation of "father, priest, and king."

On the other hand, Wordsworth compared with other poets in his tradition uses fewer serpent images in his poetry. During his earlier writing, he wholeheartedly advocates the spiritual inspiration and restorative power that nature offers man. In detailed pictures of universal harmony manifesting some secluded natural area apart from society's corruptive influence, the reptile appears with his fellow creatures. In this way, Wordsworth symbolizes the idea that all creatures, even the lowly crawling snake, are sacred and necessary creations in God's whole scheme of things.



Coleridge employs the serpent in a broader range of meanings than either Blake or Wordsworth by using it to illustrate sensual, creative, and spiritual elements. In his poetry of the supernatural, the serpent is a major symbol with chief attention given to its characteristic hypnotic eye and the consequent evil outcome that results. Even though Coleridge usually portrays the snake in an evil manner, it is important to recall that in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner he reverses this representation by describing the "water-snakes" as symbols of beauty and spiritual power. It is also noteworthy that as one of the most important literary critics of the whole English tradition, Coleridge elevates the reptile to a position of high esteem when he compares the qualities of a fine poetic creation with the movements of a serpent.

The viper appears quite often throughout Byron's work, in which the poet mainly refers to its tyrannous, deceptive, and venomous characteristics. Byron, like Blake and Shelley, was a devoted advocate of freedom over any form of tyranny, and the reptile is an especially useful symbol for representing those chief aspects of priest, king, and tyrant who maliciously endeavor to suppress mankind. Particularly in his dramas and satires does Byron emphasize the hypocrisy of the serpent-like deceiving and seductive qualities of man's existence, either illustrating mankind's self-deception or that perpetrated by others.

Keats' Lamia is one of the most beautiful portrayals contrasting the power of the poetic imagination with that of philosophical reasoning and an excellent example of the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Feeling the sensuous beauty of external existence much more than either Blake or Shelley, Keats uses the serpent for its vigorous

sensuous appeal, picturing the reptile's vivid coloring and graceful motion.

Throughout this volume of Romantic poetry, the serpent has pervaded the creations of individual poets in various ways. It has portrayed many human frailties and attributes; it has symbolized innumerable ideas and human actions, either for good or evil. The reptile has crawled from the lowest aspect to an upright position of esteem. Nevertheless, it still appears that no single poet surveys the serpent's complete and varied progress from its meanest to highest form, with the notable exception of Shelley.

From this more detailed investigation of Shelley's serpent imagery and symbolism, it is also evident that the serpent, far from being a minor poetic emblem, is one of the poet's more meaningful symbols. It exemplifies all his central themes, his conceptions for the imaginative creation of poetry, and, most important, his optimistic aims and hopeful desires for mankind.

Shelley uses the snake to enhance descriptive detail and as a natural part of creation, but the serpent lends itself quite easily to Shelley's propensity for representing opposites--one of the most significant features of his poetry. These antitheses illustrate varying ideas and degrees of good and evil. Contrasts exist between appearance and reality, reason and imagination, hatred and benevolence, creation and destruction, and mutability and permanence. All the same, the use of these arbitrary distinctions to describe the poetry of an artist who intensely disliked any dogmatic classification is oftentimes inadequate since, more often than not, several or all of these elements are simultaneously interwoven. On the other hand, this quality in the poet's



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work ultimately attests to his intellectual and creative genius, and for the sake of study, the scholar's system of organization is necessary.

Expressing condemnation of eighteenth-century analytic reason, empiricism, and his own tradition's social abhorrences, Shelley pictures man as a groveling serpent in greedy and lustful pursuit of power, wealth, and any solely materialistic objective that restrains his fellow man or himself from higher spiritual progression. In Adonais, the poet angrily berates the critics' poisonous venom, and in Prometheus Unbound, the serpent enhances the Gothic comparison of Jupiter's materialistic supremacy to the excessively perverted Iron Age of Greek mythology. Shelley uses many serpent images to symbolize single qualities in man's nature; and inevitably these individual portrayals assume universal relevance, as evidenced by Beatrice's betrayal in The Cenci and the return of brutal savagery for kindness in The Revolt of Islam.

As do Blake and Byron, Shelley also repeatedly stresses his abhorrence of institutional dominance over mankind--the villainous priest, king, tyrant in society. "Serpent temples," venomous king, and deceptive anarchy pervade the poet's creations dealing with the hypocrisy of orthodox religion and its false representatives, the tortuous reign of corrupt rulers, and the eventual delusion of tyrannical anarchy. Symbols of shadow and darkness accompany these evil representations of the serpent throughout The Mask of Anarchy, "Ode to Liberty," and The Revolt of Islam, poems that clearly illustrate Shelley's strong and sympathetic feeling for oppressed mankind.

Shelley looked upon the external world of the senses as an illusive and shadowy semblance of the other Ideal, the actual world. In order to even attempt perception of the spiritual realm of truth, one



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must be guided by the senses and use his innate intuitive power in reaching for the greater Ideal. Appearance, or what seems to be reality, is merely a deceptive feature or condition in man that diverts or prevents his genuine enlightenment. Constant prevalence of the Veil exists in Shelley's poetry, and though in a particular situation it varies in technical meaning, its basic significance is always apparent. On occasion, the Veil is a protective covering, and at times there is a dreadful fear of seeing beyond its shadow. Nevertheless, Shelley believes that only a very thin partition separates the forces of good and evil. Therefore, through love, man's innate sense of goodness, and the imagination, man does have the ability to "rend the Veil" and see beyond. Also, as is well illustrated in "Mont Blanc" and Prometheus, man must be the instigator; he must activate "the snake-like Doom coiled underneath Demogorgon's throne."

In previous discussion of Alastor, the snake-eagle combat representing an energizing force to the creative imagination symbolizes the poet's obsessive but necessary pursuit to recapture his Ideal, necessary if he is to be different from the baser spirit who lives longer, but without inspiration. Since the poet has temporarily envisioned his soulmate or captured the imaginative realm, he can no longer be satisfied with anything less. However, as Shelley was to discover in his own personal life, seldom if ever in human existence does one find the human form of his imaginative vision; and, if he so fortunately does, it seldom remains. In "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and other poems, Shelley insists that "rending the Veil" and gaining perception is infrequent, and if and when this does occur, the apprehension is subject to time's mutability. Although Prometheus' regeneration causes

the release of "the snake-like Doom" of man's happier destiny, there is no assurance that the "serpent doom" of Jupiter's evil will not again return to plague mankind.

Shelley's boat-stream imagery clearly symbolizes the world's mutability. Man's soul, or the boat representing its conveyance, may have the pleasant "isles" of the intuitive Ideal as its destination; but all along the stream or sea journey, symbolizing life's progress in the physical world, the course often changes. At times the passage is smooth, then turbulent, and again peaceful, and so on--the never-ending cycle of time, symbolized by the serpent holding its tail in its mouth. The Revolt of Islam portrays the Serpent Spirit of Good as one of the boat's passengers, signifying that, although it is temporarily subdued, it has also been rescued and will again conquer evil. Since this boat or spirit has the perpetuation of love as its destination, Shelley represents the journey to the cave as direct and smooth for the time being anyway. In contrast, the poet's boat in Alastor seldom enjoys a tranquil respite. With death as its destination, it suffers a more turbulent voyage, and the lashing waves of destruction attempting to subdue the soul are compared to a vulture grasping a struggling serpent. In a special study of Alastor, William Hildebrand equates the "ocean" to the mythical river of Greek mythology which was supposed to encircle the flat earth like a serpent with its tail in its mouth.<sup>1</sup>

The idealistic conception of permanence in Shelley's intuitive world beyond the shadowy physical existence is one in which all creatures, serpent and man, live in mutual sympathy, understanding, and love. The

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<sup>1</sup>William Hildebrand, A Study of Alastor (Kent, Ohio, 1954), p. 52.

poet offers no solution of exactly how this is to be accomplished in Queen Mab's Utopian description of universal harmony. However, in Prometheus Unbound, one finds consolation. Even though change in the human world is inevitable, so long as man cultivates his innate capacity for "Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance"--the genuine power of love--life's impermanence can be more easily endured. Thus, with the force of love and the power of the intuitive imagination, man can achieve a kind of "eternity" within the cycle of time. Shelley seems to be saying that whether mankind ever achieves any sort of relative condition of perfection is really not so important. What is truly significant is man's unceasing attempt to grasp the genuine values of life--crawling from the viper's groveling state to reach for "the snake-like Doom" of the Titan's regeneration.



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