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**BETWEEN TYRANNY AND ANARCHY**  
The Ideal of Nonviolence as a Means to Liberty in Percy  
Bysshe Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy"

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# ABSTRACT

Janne Virtanen: Between Tyranny and Anarchy: The Ideal of Nonviolence as a Means to Liberty in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy"  
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This thesis examines Percy Bysshe Shelley's political poem "The Mask of Anarchy," and the ways and the reasons why it argues for nonviolence as the proper way for the common people to resist governmental oppression. The poem was written as a response to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre in Manchester, perpetrated by the forces of the British government. It depicts two possible futures rising from a tyrannical rule: one of anarchy, and the other of liberty. This thesis shows how Shelley feared a violent retaliation by the public. This fear of escalating violence was motivated by what had transpired during the French Revolution, where Shelley considers the revolution to have been quite literal; the tyranny that was to be overthrown was merely restored anew by the violent revolutionaries in anarchy.

The study will, first, briefly examine what is meant by nonviolence as a form of resistance and how it can be an effective tactic of opposition. This is done by examining research done by political scientists Gene Sharp and Omar Wasow, respectively. Second, the thesis will discuss the philosophy of Percy Bysshe Shelley to establish how his ideas and principles that are present in his other writings are ultimately represented in the poetic verse of "The Mask of Anarchy." Shelley is keenly aware of the struggle that the people are facing, but he nevertheless believes that were the people united in their efforts, they could form a powerful force and overcome their struggle for liberty.

This study shows that the forces of Anarchy that are initially depicted in the poem are not merely a representation of the tyrannical monarchy, but the violent result of it: the degeneration of civil society. While being sympathetic to their suffering, Shelley does not absolve the public from their responsibility. Instead, he pleads with them to resist with nonviolence, as that is the only way to break the cycle of violence, and to achieve liberty.

Keywords: liberty, anarchy, tyranny, nonviolence, resistance, revolution, Percy Bysshe Shelley

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

Janne Virtanen: Between Tyranny and Anarchy: The Ideal of Nonviolence as a Means to Liberty in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy"

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Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan Percy Bysshe Shelley'n poliittista runoa "The Mask of Anarchy" ja niitä perusteita ja keinoja, joilla runo argumentoi sorretun kansan väkivallattoman vastarinnan puolesta. Runo on Shelley'n vastaus vuoden 1819 Peterloon verilöylyn Manchesterissa, jossa valtion sotilaat hyökkäsivät mielenosoittajia vastaan. Runossaan Shelley kirjoittaa kahdesta tulevaisuudesta, jotka seuraavat hallituksen tyrannisesta vallankäytöstä, joista toisessa yhteiskunta vaipuu anarkiaan ja toisessa kansa saa vapauden. Tämä tutkimus osoittaa sen, kuinka Shelley pelkää kansan nousevan väkivaltaiseen vastarintaan. Tämä pelko juontaa juurensa Ranskan vallankumouksesta, jossa Shelley'n mukaan aiempi monarkian harjoittama tyrannia lopulta vain korvattiin kansan harjoittamalla väkivallalla – anarkialla.

Ensiksi tutkimus käsittelee Gene Sharpin ja Omar Wasow'n tutkimuksia väkivallattoman vastarinnan merkityksestä sekä siitä, kuinka väkivallattomuus voi olla taktisesti tehokas keino yhteiskunnallisen muutoksen aikaansaamiseksi. Tämän jälkeen tutkimuksessa käsitellään Percy Bysshe Shelley'n omia filosofisia ja poliittisia ajatuksia, jotka esiintyvät hänen muissa kirjoitelmissa. Nämä tutkimukset sekä Shelley'n ajatukset ja periaatteet luovat pohjan runon "The Mask of Anarchy" luennalle, jossa nämä ideat realisoituvat. Shelley'n runossa tulee ilmi, että hän ymmärtää kansan kokeman tuskan, mutta uskoo kuitenkin, että yhteistyöllä tavallinen kansa muodostaa voimakkaan vastarinnan ja täten pystyy saavuttamaan tavoitteen vapaudesta.

Tämä tutkimus osoittaa, että anarkian joukot, joista runon alussa puhutaan, eivät edusta vain tyrannista monarkiaa. Sen sijaan anarkian ilmaantuminen ja verinen valtaannousu runossa kuvaavat tyrannisen monarkian lopputulosta: kansalaisyhteiskunnan rappeutumista. Vaikka Shelley ymmärtää kansan kokeman kärsimyksen, hän silti näkee kansan olevan velvoitettu toimimaan vastuullisesti. Hän pyytää kansaa vastustamaan sortoa väkivallattomasti, koska se on ainoa keino päättämään väkivaltaisuuden kierteen ja saavuttamaan vapauden.

Avainsanat: vapaus, anarkia, tyrannia, väkivallattomuus, vastarinta, vallankumous, Percy Bysshe Shelley

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## INTRODUCTION

“There are two types of laws: just and unjust. . . . One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws” (King 9-10). These words of Martin Luther King Jr. were written in 1963 in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* after his imprisonment for participating in nonviolent protest during the American Civil Rights Movement. In the letter, he states that “oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself” (18). King worries that if the “pent-up resentments and latent frustrations” of the black population are not allowed to be expressed in nonviolent means, “they will seek expression through violence” (18-19). As one of the leaders of the movement, his worry was in how that yearning will eventually manifest in those who are oppressed.

In such dire moments, throughout history, people have battled with the question: how *should* one respond when faced with deep injustice? English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was confronted with this question, when he observed from afar his own countrymen suffering in the hands of the government. The year 2019 marked the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo massacre in St Peter’s Fields in Manchester, England, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August. In 1819, a crowd of approximately 60,000 were gathered to protest the parliament, demanding its reform during a time of increasing unemployment, political corruption, and famine. Cavalry, with their blades drawn, charged into the crowd, resulting in the death of fifteen people, and hundreds more were injured and wounded during the conflict (Riding). Shelley’s answer to the question imposed by this tragedy was “The Mask of Anarchy” (in this thesis abbreviated as “The Mask”).

“The Mask” is a political poem by Shelley, written in 1819 as a response to the massacre. Albeit the poem was written shortly after the fact, and then sent to *The Examiner* (a weekly paper), it was not published until 1832 out of political expediency (M. Shelley, “Note”). In its essence, the poem argues for maintaining nonviolence as a principled opposition in the face of oppression; in

this case, oppression perpetrated, by the British government. Shelley's concern for violent retaliation back then was the same as King's nearly a century-and-a-half later, as the bloodiness that transpired during the French Revolution was still fresh in Shelley's memory. The ideology of Shelley that spans through much of his other writings (to which we shall return to later), and that can be found in "The Mask," too, is very much a precursor to the ideas asserted by the freedom fighters of the following century, King and Mahatma Gandhi.

In this thesis I will analyze "The Mask of Anarchy" and show how and why it leads to arguing for a nonviolent form of opposition to the governmental oppression of common people. While finding passages in "The Mask" that support the *how* is more straightforward, the question of *why* Shelley argues for nonviolence requires a more in-depth examination of his prose. For Shelley's own prose, the bulk of the examination will be on *A Philosophical View of Reform*, combined with key ideas from "A Defence of Poetry," and other short essays of his. In support of his precursory view, belated political literature on the efficacy of nonviolent resistance is utilized in the examination of the poem and its verse's implied meaning. Bolstering the ideas from Shelley's works, the exhaustive study of nonviolent protests by Gene Sharp and a recent paper by Omar Wasow provide a framework – a justification, perhaps – for Shelley's principle of nonviolence.

The thesis begins first with a brief overview on the concept of nonviolence to showcase how and why it should be regarded as a possible and beneficial means of resistance. This is followed by an introduction to Percy Bysshe Shelley, to demonstrate why he might have felt the need to write "The Mask" at the time as a response to what had transpired in Manchester. The purpose in this section is to show that in Shelley's view poetry, and poets in general, have a responsibility to foster their societies of the present and the future. As an astute historian, he saw the danger of England succumbing to the same fate as France, where the revolution was quite literal; what was thought to be overthrown – the cruelty perpetrated by the monarchy – was merely to be restored anew by the violent revolutionaries.

In the latter half of this thesis, the focus will shift to “The Mask,” and its story of a people, where the oppressed struggle for liberty between tyranny and anarchy. For Shelley, neither of these latter two were an option, as one, invariably, begets the other. The way out of that cycle is through brave resistance through principled nonviolence. I will argue that the poem depicts two possible futures: one of malevolence, and the other of benevolence, both being realized from the same reality of tyranny. Thus, while the message of nonviolence is important, it is imperative to trace the fine line between good (liberty and nonviolence) and evil (anarchy and violence) in the poem, because Shelley understands that people are fallible.

There is some previous research on Shelley and his stance on nonviolence, most extensively done by Art Young in his book *Shelley and Nonviolence* which was originally published in 1975. Yet it only provides a brief examination of “The Mask,” without much discussion concerning the underlying motivations behind the poem (the book gives more emphasis to the poem’s possible inspiration to Gandhi). More recent examples of research on “The Mask” and its argumentation for nonviolence can be found in the Marxist critiques done by Matthew C. Borushko (2010) and George Ewane Ngide (2020), but both fail to recognize that the rise of anarchy in the poem refers to the violent uprising of the general populace, rather than mere governmental oppression, something that this study shows to be the case.

“The Mask of Anarchy” is certainly not a lone representative of poetry devised as commentary on contemporary protest movements. In his study of the poetry of the period in question, John Gardner writes that “[l]iterature, specifically poetry, became a vital battleground at this time where radicals and anti-radicals vied with each other to produce defining literary responses to events which seemed to have the greatest potential.” He continues by arguing that “the years from 1819-21 came to constitute a distinct literary period characterised by the relationship between literature and popular protests that seemed to be leading toward a Revolution” (2-3). The poetry of this period typically depicted a struggle towards better representation of the people (4), something

that Shelley himself hoped to contribute towards. However, what “The Mask” tries to accomplish is not better representation per se, but rather to instruct the people of what he thinks are the proper – or most beneficial – means of achieving this objective.

The battle for liberty between tyranny and anarchy ties “The Mask of Anarchy” to the modern day. Shelley’s poem is not only relevant due to the resurgent interest in the Peterloo massacre for its second centenary, which was preceded by the Mike Leigh film *Peterloo* (2018) and the book *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (2018) by historian Jacqueline Riding, but also due to contemporary protest movements. The death of George Floyd in early 2020 sparked mass protests throughout western democracies against police violence. Governmental lockdowns due to the global spread of Covid-19 have resulted in protests against these measures and their effects on rising unemployment and curtailing of civil liberties. Some ongoing protests (at the time of writing) precede these tragedies of 2020; the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong against the Chinese government’s creeping influence, and the anti-government protests following disputed election results in Belarus, to name a few.

While the reasons for the development of political upheavals during the last few years are multivariant, they are all underlined by struggle against perceived injustice and oppression. This recurring historical pattern of political fluctuation did not escape Shelley two centuries ago. A deeper analysis and interpretation of the poem, then, is what makes this research and Shelley’s poem relevant even to modern audiences; for it is history and the triumphs of the nonviolent protest movements of the twentieth century, that have made Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “The Mask of Anarchy” timeless.

## NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

Albeit the more well-known examples of nonviolence are almost inevitably attributed to the twentieth-century movements of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., the history of the practice goes back to the times of antiquity (Sharp 1: 75). At its core, Sharp describes nonviolent



action as “a technique used to control, combat and destroy the opponent’s power by nonviolent means of wielding power” (1: 4). This term covers an expansive list of approaches to resistance, from public speeches to marches and from wearing of symbols to boycotts. However, all these forms of resistance need to be rooted in nonviolence for them to be effective – not only as a show of their strength of the moment, but also to garner more public support to their cause in the future. Sharp emphasizes that “as a technique, . . . nonviolent action is not passive. It is *not* inaction. It is *action* that is nonviolent” (1: 64). This view is mirrored by Gandhi in his writings: “Non-cooperation is not a passive state, it is an intensely active state – more active than physical resistance or violence. Passive resistance is a misnomer” (41). What makes this a significant notion is that it attributes people who otherwise might feel powerless with having agency; a resource that the downtrodden sorely would have a hunger for. This idea of the people – as a group and as individuals – having power and agency is present in “The Mask,” and will be revisited later on in this study.

Despite its extensive historical precedent, nonviolent protest is still, in many ways, an understudied subject; however, there has been a recent and increasing interest to study this more bottom-up societal influence of peoples’ resistance movements, rather than the influence of the elite class upon the rest of society (Taibbi and Halper). To bridge the temporal gap between Gene Sharp’s study in 1973, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, and the present day, Omar Wasow documents in his 2020 study of the black-led protests of the 1960s and early 70s how nonviolent activism and its strategies, on average, generated more sympathetic coverage in the media environment and public discourse. He found that “when peaceful protesters are the object of state or vigilante violence, mainstream media are expected to use issue frames that are especially effective for activists” (638). In contrast, when violence erupted in the ranks of the protestors, it prompted “widespread concern among the mass public about crime and disorder” due to a more negative press coverage (649). Other research has also shown how the media’s coverage of violent attacks against peaceful protests

resulted in generating public sympathy towards protestors. By courting violence while not perpetrating it themselves, the protestors can frame the narrative into a conflict between “a ‘good’ movement and an ‘evil’ system.” This transforms violence and the threat of violence into a liability, breaking “the terror on which the system ultimately depended” (McAdam 70). Wasow concludes that while an “eye-for-an-eye” response by the public to violence may seem moral, it may not be a strategically beneficial tactic to the cause of the protestors and could result delaying the societal change they are striving towards (657).

Of course, when Shelley was writing his poem, he lacked this data-driven empirical information that we in the modern world can draw conclusions from. Instead, the impetus for his verse emerges from principle, and the close spatial and temporal proximity to the French Revolution and its ongoing aftermath. He vehemently did not wish to see the people of his country succumbing to the same – what he considered – “dreadful revenge” (*Philosophical View* 17). However, before discussing Shelley’s views concerning change and revolution, his view of his role as a poet (and poets in general) in the wider fabric of society is examined.

#### SHELLEY, THE UNACKNOWLEDGED LEGISLATOR

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley described her husband as “a republican [who] loved a democracy.” His belief that “the great truth that the many, if accordant and resolute, could control the few, . . . made him long to teach his injured countrymen how to resist. . . . The poem was written for the people. . . .” (“Note”). This strong belief of his was eventually written in the verse of “The Mask.” Yet, the question remains: what made Shelley feel the need, or, more importantly, the responsibility to write to his countrymen? Why should *he* instruct the people of Britain on the “proper” way to resist?

First, poetry and poets hold special significance in society for Shelley. In his essay “A Defence of Poetry,” he writes that “poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, . . . they are the institutors of laws and the

founders of civil society. . .” (56); and he famously noted that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (82). He also states that the poet “not only beholds intensely the present as it is, . . . but he beholds the future in the present” (56). Thus, not only does Shelley regard poets as being “legislators” in the present, but he also claims that they have an oracle-like ability, or responsibility, to foresee the future that the present holds. The poet “essentially comprises and unites both these characters” of legislator and prophet (56). This idea plays a significant role in “The Mask,” in which the poet is, besides reacting to and commenting on the present condition of the British society, also depicting its possible future.

Second, Shelley admits that “the immediate emotions of [man’s] nature, especially in its most inartificial state, prompt him to inflict pain, and to arrogate dominion. . . . He is revengeful, proud and selfish” (*A Defence of Poetry* 33). Special attention should be paid to the descriptors “immediate” and “inartificial” here, because this base state of being, then, is alterable. This potential is, at least in some ways, dependent on the surrounding community: if the community is “highly civilized,” the individual “will more acutely sympathize with the sufferings and enjoyments of others,” while in “a society of a less degree of civilization,” the opposite is more likely (35). While this view rings a certain kind of elitism, Shelley is not a fundamentalist in his point of view: “The benevolent propensities are . . . inherent in the human mind. We are impelled to seek the happiness of others” (38). Thus, in each individual there is capacity for good and evil, both being natural to the human condition. In “A Defence of Poetry” Shelley argues that it is poetry which “strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb,” because to him, “the presence or absence of poetry in its most perfect and universal form, has been found to be connected with good and evil in conduct or habit” (61, 64). This becomes abundantly clear in his views about the French Revolution, and what contributed to its bloodiness.

Shelley's notions about good and evil were echoed later, famously, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who after his experience under a totalitarian regime wrote that "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being" (75). While what has been discussed above is at the level of an individual, from those individuals a nation is formed. Great literature in Shelley's view has the ability not only to train the individual and fortify his moral nature, but literature also reflects the society, or nation, as a whole; a nation should "attain to a system for arts and literature of their own" (*Philosophical View* 26).

While Shelley held the literature of some nations in high regard, he did not extend that same courtesy to the French: "The French were what their literature is . . . weak, superficial, vain, with little imagination, and with passions as well as judgements cleaving to the external forms of things" (*Philosophical View* 17-18). This is not to say that Shelley believed that these descriptors are inherent, but they are "engendered from generation to generation" (18). The people of France, after "the just and successful Revolt of America," in their effort to liberate themselves from tyranny, took "a dreadful revenge on their oppressors" (16-17). In Shelley's view, "the oppressed" were "satiated from fountains of literature poisoned by the spirit and the form of monarchy" (17). Shelley admits that the revolution did overthrow the monarchy, aristocracy, and the old hierarchies, but due to the deprivation by their institutions, the disaffected unimaginative revolutionaries "restored in a certain limited degree the old system" (18).

In essence, Shelley does not blame the people, then, but rather the institution of monarchy and the rigidity it has as a system of governance which stifles this aforementioned artistic flourishing of the nation. Change, or the ability of people to affect and demand change, is a necessity for a republican such as Shelley. For him, "the public right to demand happiness is a principle of nature . . ." and it is "the substance and the end of political institutions" (*Philosophical View* 49); however, he does not believe that the House of Commons is a true representation of the

people and their needs (35). Shelley ardently believed that “the first principle of political reform is the natural equality of men, not with relation to their property but to their rights” (70).

Yet, Shelley is not a fundamentalist in his views. For him, a gradual reform is more beneficial than none at all: “it is no matter how slow, gradual and cautious be the change; we shall demand more and more with firmness and moderation, . . . nothing is more idle than to reject a limited benefit because we cannot without great sacrifice obtain an unlimited one” (76-77). The majority, if enlightened and united, can become an “irresistible force” against any government that is unwilling to change (79). In a prescient manner – in the light of the above discussion about Wasow’s findings – Shelley states that he does not believe that “active resistance is not justifiable when all other means shall have failed, but because in this instance temperance and courage would produce greater advantages than the most decisive victory” (81). A pyrrhic victory is no victory at all. With this, Shelley alludes to the specter of anarchy that looms over any society that is failing its people. He writes that “Infinite and inestimable calamities belong to oppression, but the most fatal of them all is that mine of unexploded mischief which it has practiced beneath the foundations of society, and with which, ‘pernicious to one touch’ it threatens to involve the ruin of the entire building together with its own” (84-85).

To conclude this section of the study, the purpose so far has been to establish a framework for Shelley’s poetical and political philosophy that is behind his verse in “The Mask” which will be examined next. According to Shelley, it is the duty of a poet to write in the present for the possible future. He recognizes that people have the capability for malevolence and benevolence, and the poet cultivates the latter so that the former would not take over, as he felt it did during the French Revolution. The two possible futures that “The Mask” presents are the malevolence of Anarchy, and the benevolence of Liberty, and it is through nonviolence that Liberty can be achieved.

## THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERTY IN “THE MASK OF ANARCHY”

“The Mask” can be roughly divided into three parts. The first part relates the presence of tyranny – which is the present moment as Shelley perceives it. The second part, or the first possible future, is marked by the arrival of Anarchy, and the desolation it lays upon its path. The third part, which is the longest one, happens as Hope arrives. This latter half of the poem – the second possible future – consists of a long speech which explicitly argues for nonviolence as the proper response to the many privations and suffering the people are experiencing. While the argumentation for nonviolence is explicit, the reasoning behind it is implicit, and necessitates closer inspection. It is hard to delineate the speaker of the poem from the poet himself in “The Mask,” as many of the same ideas present in the poem appear in Shelley’s prose, as will be indicated when appropriate. Considering the consistency between these two, they are treated essentially as one in the ensuing examination.

The beginning of “The Mask” finds the speaker of the poem “asleep in Italy,” when he hears “a voice,” purportedly the news of what had transpired in Manchester, which “with great power” inspired him to divine the poem (1-4). Shelley does not hide behind his metaphors but is direct in his criticism of the British government, by naming some of the statesmen under whose watch the tragedy came to pass: Murder is played by Castlereagh, Fraud by Lord Eldon, Hypocrisy by Sidmouth, and, while the rest are unnamed, there were “many more Destructions” disguised in the masquerade, “Bishops, lawyers, peers, or spies” (26-29). The society this preamble in the poem describes is a rotten system, where those in positions of authority are abusing their power, and any care that they might have is feigned, as Lord Eldon’s big tears that turn to mill-stones as they fall on the heads of little children, knocking their brains out (15-21).

Anarchy is the last one to arrive to this masquerade; or, more precisely, the masquerade ends when he arrives:

Last came Anarchy: he rode

On a white horse, splashed with blood;  
 He was pale even to the lips,  
 Like Death in the Apocalypse. (30-33)

This arrival is important, as it implies that anarchy is the end result of a corrupt system – it is what follows through tyrannical rule and non-representation of the people. Anarchy here is not a descriptor for the government, as has been stated elsewhere (see McGinley; Ngide), or for the Crown, even though he is wearing one. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and this aphorism is presented here with the white horse that represents the purity in their intentions, yet it is splashed with blood; Anarchy is the populace rising against tyranny – but with violence. Anarchy reigns supreme and supplants the government, the monarchy, and the laws of the land and takes their mantle: “I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW” (37). While Gardner in his analysis does state that “Shelley attaches no living personality to ‘Anarchy’, while generally attacking the office of king” (79), he fails to notice the true meaning behind this. Anarchy cannot be personified – unlike the aforementioned Murder, Hypocrisy, and Fraud – because there is no one person to assign this specific “Destruction” to; Anarchy is a mass of people.

What makes the above argument of Anarchy being an uprising of the people most salient, is when Shelley in the poem alludes to “The adoring multitude,” and “a mighty troop around” Anarchy (41-42) which already imply a great number of people who are enthralled by this ideology. The disenfranchised populace at this point have imbibed the ideology of anarchy and accept the specter as their “Lord” (45). They become “Drunk with intoxication / Of the wine of desolation” (48-49) as they tear up and trample down through England (52) “Waving each a bloody sword / For the service of their Lord” (44-45). To further elaborate on this point, it is noteworthy how Anarchy and those in his thrall “rode through England proud and gay” until “they came to London town” (47, 53). This means that the advance of Anarchy does not spread outwards from London, from the heart of the government or the monarchy, but rather falls inwards into London, further supporting

the view that this is a revolt of the people in the margins that has developed into bloodshed that spans the entire society, rather than just violence perpetrated by a group of operatives sent out by the government against the common people.

To dispense with the idea that Anarchy could be read as a representation of the monarchy (or any other form of government), the definition of anarchy is an “absence of government; a state of lawlessness due to the absence or inefficiency of the supreme power; political disorder” (*OED*), making anarchy the very antithesis of an organized and hierarchical form of government such as monarchy. Thus, it cannot be the case that anarchy could be a representation of the tyrannical rule of the government, unless one dared to argue that Shelley would confuse these two differing concepts with each other while writing his poem. The reading I am arguing for does not absolve the government from their responsibility in the bloodshed in this first depicted future, but it is willing to admit that even the disenfranchised can succumb to malevolent behavior, which is in line with Shelley’s own philosophy that was discussed above. To put it simply: monarchy can be (and in this poem is) the *cause* of anarchy, but it cannot – by definition – *be* anarchy.

Here the previous discussion on Shelley’s views concerning the French Revolution, where the downtrodden people retaliated violently against those in power, should be broached once more, as this is what Shelley fears could happen as a response to the Manchester tragedy – he fears “the triumph of Anarchy” (57). In the poem, we hear the people, “The hired murderers” (60), who have bought into the ideology crying out to Anarchy:

‘We have waited weak and lone  
 For thy coming, Mighty One!  
 Our purses are empty, our swords are cold,  
 Give us glory, and blood, and gold.’ (62-65)

This stanza illuminates the dire state of the society; the people feel they have been abandoned and abused. The people of England are poor, without purpose and hope. As the influence of Anarchy



permeates, it reaches eventually those who initially participated in the “ghastly masquerade” (27), before Anarchy arrived:

Lawyers and priests, a motley crowd,  
 To the earth their pale brows bowed;  
 Like a bad prayer not over loud,  
 Whispering – ‘Thou art Law and God.’ – (66-69)

Ultimately, everyone bows to Anarchy:

Then all cried with one accord,  
 ‘Thou art King, and God, and Lord;  
 Anarchy, to thee we bow,  
 Be thy name made holy now!’ (70-73)

As Anarchy signifies all those people bowing, it follows that he “bowed and grinned to every one” (75) in return. Anarchy is finally described as “the Skeleton” (74), with no mask, meaning that there is no pretense of being anything else than the corpse that he is. Anarchy is the embodiment of the death of civil society, and the only thing that can stand against this future becoming a reality is hope.

Hope arrives to the scene when all is but lost, as Anarchy and his mighty troop are taking over every institution of the land. Hope, “a maniac maid,” lays “. . . down in the street, / Right before the horses’ feet” (86, 98-99), to stop the procession of Anarchy. From this simple act of courage – act of nonviolent resistance – a bright “Shape” (110) grows which like a wind passes over the heads of the people, the “prostrate multitude” (126), enlightening them from the darkness that they inhabit. While Anarchy is defeated, his “Horse of Death” (132) flees in the light to this awakening. This is significant, as it implies that there is always the possibility for anarchy to be delivered once more upon a society if both the public and those in government abandon their responsibilities toward their own country and people.

After the defeat of Anarchy, a long speech follows which lasts for the remainder of the poem. This speech is ostensibly performed by England herself, “[w]hich gave the sons of England birth” (140). The speech begins by addressing the people as sharing the same origin, emphasizing what they have in common:

‘Men of England, heirs of Glory,  
 Heroes of unwritten story,  
 Nurslings of one mighty Mother,  
 Hopes of her, and one another; (147-50)

Not only does this speak to their past as “heirs of Glory,” but it also reflects on their possible future as “Heroes of unwritten story.” For this to happen, it requires awakening to their purpose. The poem continues:

‘Rise like Lions after slumber  
 In unvanquishable number,  
 Shake your chains to Earth like dew  
 Which in sleep had fallen on you –  
 Ye are many – they are few. (151-55)

These lines affirm the above discussion about responsibility – the people can be powerful, like “Lions” and “unvanquishable” as a collective. In a certain sense, the people themselves are partly to blame for their current predicament; had they not been asleep, had they realized – or if they would realize – the potential they have as a group, they could be a forceful resistance to oppression and those in power. However, as the poem duly notes here, and what it repeats in its closing line, “Ye are many – they are few,” is a stark reminder of that potential being both for benevolence and malevolence. While on the one hand it is a recognition of potential hope and freedom, on the other, it reminds the people that they can exert their collective power also for evil, which is precisely what happens in the first future that the poem depicts.

The speech appropriately lists some of the grievances that the public has towards their government. For example, it recognizes how the populace is treated akin to slaves (157), whose pay is not in accordance with the toil they perform (160-61), and how their children go hungry and die during the winter (168-71). These passages describe the reality brought upon the Englishmen by the introduction of the Corn Laws in 1815, which resulted in “the inflation of prices for basic foodstuffs like bread, while, at the same time, the wages of the labouring man and woman fell” (Riding). The speech also critiques “Paper coin – that forgery” (“The Mask” line 180), which did not escape the ire of Shelley’s in *A Philosophical View of Reform* either, where he writes that the new system brought by paper currency is “a far subtler and more complicated contrivance of misrule” (41).

Yet, while the speech acknowledges these legitimate grievances, it reminds the people that violence is not the appropriate response to them:

‘Then it is to feel revenge  
 Fiercely thirsting to exchange  
 Blood for blood – and wrong for wrong –  
 Do not thus when ye are strong, (193-96)

This stanza alludes to the first part of the poem, the escalation of violence and misery, a real outcome which Shelley fears will take place and which he with this poem tries to prevent from taking place. While Shelley here admits that it is natural to feel revenge – or reveals that he sympathizes with the notion – he is trying to break the cycle of violence. Gene Sharp writes of such an impending scenario: “When both belligerents use violent methods, a pattern frequently occurs in which the violence of each side is met with counterviolence in a continuing cycle. . . . When, however, one side is fighting with a different, nonviolent, weapons system, the constant circle of violence is broken” (3: 552).

The poem continues to relate with the people of England, not only with their grievances, but also telling them what Freedom represents: Justice, Wisdom, Peace, and Love (234-50). These

benevolent attributes are capitalized as were the malevolent ones at the beginning of the poem. These are all human attributes, which Shelley believes to be inherent in each person – as was noted above in the discussion about his philosophy. What Shelley strives to is for people to exemplify the benevolent attributes, rather than succumbing to those of malevolence. To achieve that, the voice in the poem calls for “Science, Poetry and Thought” to be their lamps (258-59), which is in accordance with the earlier discussion on the importance of literature in the forming of a nation and its people. Once again, the message is clearly driven from principle, rather than expediency. While it might be idealistic for Shelley to presume his contemporary audience to be literate for his message to promulgate, it should not be forgotten that this poem was written for posterity, too. It has been documented that Gandhi quoted sections of “The Mask” to a crowd in South Africa (Young 146). Shamefully, it was the decision of Leigh Hunt, the then editor of *the Examiner* not to publish the poem until 1832, as he deemed that the public would not be able to understand Shelley’s intent (M. Shelley “Note”).

There is a point in the poem where Shelley begins to truly argue for nonviolence, as he calls for “. . . a great Assembly . . . / Of the fearless and the free” (266-67). Instead of violence and anarchy, the voice appeals to the people to use their voice, their demand for freedom, as their weapon: “Be your strong and simple words / Keen to wound as sharpened swords” (303-04). The voice predicts that they will face bayonets that desire English blood (315-17), but nevertheless instructs the people to stand together:

‘Stand ye calm and resolute,  
Like a forest close and mute,  
With folded arms and looks which are  
Weapons of an unvanquishable war. (323-26)

The laws, “Good or ill,” (332) will stand between the two belligerents. Here Shelley calls for the future generations, the “Children of a wiser day” (337) to echo the words of liberty of those

standing in solidarity against tyranny. He knows that the struggle will be long and painful: “Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew; – / What they like, that let them do.” The voice continues: “Look upon them as they slay / Till their rage has died away” (346-47, 350-51).

The efficacy of this tactic is hard to imagine, as it is for Gardner in his analysis of the poem, where he states that there is a sense of “futility” in the resistance portrayed in these passages (85). However, Shelley writes in *A Philosophical View of Reform* that he believes “if [the soldier] should observe neither resistance nor flight he would be reduced to confusion and indecision. . . . This unexpected reception would probably throw him back upon a recollection of the true nature of the measures of which he was made the instrument, and the enemy might be converted into the ally” (81-82). While this may have been a mere hypothesis by Shelley, Sharp writes that such nonviolent resistance could cause “[u]nease and disaffection among the opponent’s agents of repression,” which “may be expressed by deliberate inefficiency in carrying out their duties,” which happened, for example, in the 1917 Russian revolution (672). Also, in 1943, after strikes and other forms of native resistance by the Danish in protest of the deportation of Jews from Denmark, German authorities in Denmark began sabotaging direct orders from Berlin: “[The authorities] had met resistance based on principle, and their ‘toughness’ had melted like butter in the sun” (Arendt 175). Shelley may have been an idealist, but the speaker in the poem predicts the soldiers will feel shame for their actions: “And the blood thus shed will speak / In hot blushes on their cheek” (354-55). As Shelley states in *Philosophical View*, “the soldier is a man and an Englishman” (82) and, as is suggested in the poem, that there are “bold, true warriors” (360) among the soldiers, who would take the side of those struggling for liberty.

Shelley wishes that the sacrifice of not only of those people in the verse of this poem, but also of those on the fields of Manchester would serve as an inspiration to England. As a strong call for unity, this is like a “volcano heard afar” (367), which suggests once more the spatial and temporal expansion of the poem’s message to contemporary and future peoples under tyrannical

rule. Perhaps it also functions as a call for international support and class solidarity to the plight of the people of England.

A few decades later, John Stuart Mill considered the possible pitfall of democracy being but a rule of the majority that does not represent the views and desires of the minority. He argued that “It is an essential part of democracy that minorities should be adequately represented. No real democracy, nothing but a false show of democracy, is possible without it” (268). Mill “The Mask” concludes with the singular statement “Ye are many – they are few” (376), words that Shelley deems to bear repeating. It is not unfathomable to see the sentiment of Mill being encapsulated within those six prescient words. Shelley stresses the importance of the people to remember their strength, because if, perhaps when, the majority are in power, they have the responsibility to show justice, to exemplify wisdom, to relate peace, and to feel love towards their fellow human beings.

## CONCLUSION

Not only was the year 2019 the second centennial of the Peterloo Massacre, but it also coincided with the third decennial anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. To hear the young people in Beijing echo the sentiment of the people of the Manchester protest so long before, “We’ll continue to sit here peacefully. That is what we always did” (Kent 11:14-11:21), is gut-wrenching and makes us question the extent of human progress. We still do not know, decades later, what truly transpired soon after in Tiananmen; only that too many of them never returned home.

The goal of this thesis is not to claim that Percy Bysshe Shelley is right in his views. The debate in political science – and in the public at large – on the efficacy of nonviolence is still very much ongoing. Instead, the aim here was to provide context from his other works to the views that are present in “The Mask of Anarchy”: to show why he feels the need to take responsibility in arguing for nonviolent resistance and to warn about the danger of succumbing to anarchy as a response to the Peterloo Massacre. Clearly, one of the main motivators for Shelley was the bloodiness of the French Revolution, which he did not want to see repeated inside the borders of his

own native country. In his eyes, the revolution in France seemed to be a mere rotation of the wheel, where the same despotic system which was supposed to be replaced was reimplemented. He felt that the people of England could do something more transformative.

Shelley depicts two possible futures in “The Mask of Anarchy.” There is the one with Anarchy, in which the populace initially retaliates with violence that eventually leads to the crumbling of the whole society. Rather than it being governmental operatives marching next to Anarchy, this thesis argues that it is a popular uprising turned into bloodshed. Then there is the other with Liberty, where the populace is instructed to resist through nonviolent means to eventually affect positive change in their society. There is clearly suffering in both, but just as Gandhi found that “the magic of suffering” can unify a nation (4), Viktor E. Frankl found during his trials in concentration camps that “[s]uffering is an ineradicable part of life,” and that “[w]ithout suffering and death human life cannot be complete,” but, nevertheless, suffering can add deeper meaning to an individual’s life (54).

Frankl quotes Friedrich Nietzsche’s words “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*,” which in Frankl’s view “could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic<sup>1</sup> efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why – an aim – for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible *how* of their existence” (62). For Shelley, if the aim in “The Mask of Anarchy” is Liberty, then the cross of suffering should be borne with nonviolence.

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<sup>1</sup> Mental health

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