

Research Article

# Romanticism and Nonviolence: Percy Bysshe Shelley Exhumed

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## Abstract

This paper posits that in his prose and poetry, Percy Bysshe Shelley (an English poet of the Romantic period) articulates both the philosophy and methodology of nonviolence as a response to oppression, repression and marginalisation. It also contends that although his theory significantly impacted the formation of the philosophies and socio-political campaigns of later nonviolence activists, especially the Indian Civil Rights Activist Mahatma Gandhi, Shelley has not been sufficiently credited for the ground-breaking political philosophy of nonviolence. This article thus explores Shelley's philosophy of nonviolence in his poetry, prose, dramas and pamphlets. It compares the nonviolence philosophies of Gandhi and Shelley and brings out Shelley's unquestionable influence on Mahatma Gandhi. The article raises questions about why Shelley was not credited with the philosophy of nonviolence and suggests possible reasons for this apparent near lack of global consideration for the English Romantic poet despite his pioneering the philosophy. Having proceeded thus and upon thorough academic investigation, the article irresistibly concludes that contrary to popular socio-political opinion, Percy Bysshe Shelley is the unrivalled father of nonviolence as an ethical and pragmatic philosophy for socio-political mutation. By this study, Shelley is given his rightful position in matters of nonviolence and thus exhumed as a poet-philosopher whose philosophy has outlived his existence and practised to date by activists to press for reform.

## Keywords

Nonviolence, Romanticism, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Nelson Mandela, Oppression, Repression, Exhume

## 1. Introduction

The struggle for human liberties through nonviolence has gained increasing momentum in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela have conspicuously and ostensibly been credited as the pacesetters of the philosophy of nonviolence as a solution to socio-political oppression and repression.

Dr Lavindra Kumar [11] observes that from “the descent of man on Earth, *Ahimsa* came with him as a natural tendency of his. For *Ahimsa*, the word in English is nonviolence coined by

Mahatma Gandhi” [3] Gandhi [6] himself stresses that “Nonviolence is a term I had to coin in order to bring out the root meaning of *Ahimsa*...it is soul force or the power of Godhead with us” [4].

Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan [18] provide a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance in achieving political goals. The authors argue that nonviolent resistance is more successful than violent resistance in overthrowing dictators, expelling foreign occupa-

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tions, and promoting succession. In the same light, Michael Nagler [15] in *Nonviolent Resistance, Social Justice, and Positive Peace* argues that nonviolent resistance is crucial for achieving positive peace beyond the individual scale. The author contends that social justice is seldom voluntarily given by oppressors and that nonviolent resistance is necessary to achieve it. Sharon Erickson Nepstad [16] provides an overview of the history and dynamics of popular civil resistance movements. The author argues that nonviolent means are generally more effective than armed resistance. Stellan Vinthagen [21] in “Nonviolent Action and Its Misconceptions: Insights for Social Scientists” challenges some common misconceptions about nonviolent action and provides insights for social scientists studying this topic. Redfield, Marc [12] in *The politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* opines that Shelley’s “work so consistently links aesthetic practice to political struggle and thematizes the complexity as well as the necessity of genuine renovation”.

Although these authors and critics have not traced the origin of Nonviolence, the concept of nonviolence has been around for centuries and has been used by many cultures and religions throughout history. For Buddhists, nonviolence is the centrality. It teaches that all life is sacred and that violence only begets more violence. The Buddha himself was a proponent of nonviolence and taught his followers to practice compassion and non-harm towards all living beings. Mahatma Gandhi perhaps to date is the most well-known advocate of nonviolence in modern times. He used nonviolent resistance to lead India to independence from British rule in 1947. Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence, or ahimsa, was based on the idea that violence only begets more violence and that true change can only come through peaceful means. Martin Luther King Jr.: [10], a prominent leader in the American civil rights movement, used nonviolent resistance to fight against racial segregation and discrimination. He was inspired by Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence and believed that it was the most effective way to bring about social change. In recent times, César Chávez [5] a labour leader and civil rights activist used nonviolent resistance to fight for the rights of farm workers in California. He founded the United Farm Workers Union and led a series of strikes and boycotts that eventually led to better working conditions for farm workers. The Arab Spring was a series of protests and uprisings that took place across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010-2011. Many of these protests were characterized by their use of nonviolent resistance, including sit-ins, strikes, and other forms of civil disobedience.

In these discussions, literary and historical, there is not a single mention of the name Percy Bysshe Shelley. This moves us to ask a series of questions.

### 1.1. Research Questions

- 1) What is nonviolence philosophy
- 2) Who first introduced the philosophy of nonviolence

- 3) What relationship was there between Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mahatma Gandhi
- 4) Why is Shelley not credited with the philosophy of nonviolence?

### 1.2. Hypothesis

This study is premised on the hypothesis that nonviolence as a political weapon against all forms of repression and aggression is widely used today and accredited to the Indian civil rights activist Mahatma Gandhi, yet in his prose and poetry, Percy Bysshe Shelley articulates both the philosophy and methodology of nonviolence as a response to oppression, repression and marginalisation. We also contend that Shelley has not been sufficiently credited for this ground-breaking political philosophy which is made manifest in his works and which inspired Gandhi. of nonviolence. Shelley’s philosophy of nonviolence seems to have died and buried with him in his grave. This study thus exhumes both Shelley’s philosophy of non-violence and Shelley the Man as fore-grounder of this philosophy.

### 1.3. Methodology

To give to Shelley what is Shelley, that is, the originality and authenticity of nonviolence as a philosophy of life attributed advertently or inadvertently to Gandhi and other civil rights activists like Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, this study begins by discussing in some detail, the philosophy of nonviolence in the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley and then examines Shelley’s influence on Gandhi and the relationship between the two. In this way, the truth will be examined, and Shelley and his philosophy that seemed to have been buried exhumed.

## 2. Shelley and Nonviolence: An Ethical and Pragmatic Philosophy

Percy Bysshe Shelley is the first English writer to recommend organised passive resistance and massive civil disobedience as non-violent tactics for social reform in his poetry, prose and dramatic works. Shelley’s non-violent philosophy is not happenstance given that it extends beyond the implications found in his most famous poem “The Mask of Anarchy” to a coherent philosophy of action recognised as playing a very prominent role in the poet’s philosophical, political, and ethical thought.

Nonviolence is defined generally as the absence of violence, that is, the refusal to fight and use physical force, especially in trying to effect a political change. But Shelley’s non-violence goes beyond the above definition. In fact, for Shelley, non-violence is spiritually based. It encourages altruism and selflessness. Shelley’s preference for non-violent action to combat injustice as opposed to either violence or inaction is both ethically and pragmatically grounded in his imaginative

and rational faith in humanity. Ethically, he believes that violence is wrong because it corrupts the individual soul that it is supposedly attempting to liberate, and pragmatically, it is unwise because it gives social acceptability to those destructive impulses in human nature that in themselves deny the possibility of peace and brotherhood. According to Shelley, non-violence should, to the individual, mean an attempt at self-purification, that is, as Art Young [23] states it, "...The elimination of fear and products of fear, violence and hatred from self, and the influence of love and the products of love, truth, and justice, in self". [22]

Collective nonviolence, therefore, brings together individuals to actively protest against the existence of social injustice or to instigate the reform of political institutions. For this change to be possible, collective non-violent action should include the use of non-cooperation, civil disobedience, passive resistance, and a commitment to meaningful reform within the established system. Whether individual or collective, the nonviolent activist seeks to realise courage and fortitude through "suffering love" which he uses as a strategic weapon of forgiveness. What this means is that although the non-violent activist suffers, he must not hate those who repress, on the contrary, he must undergo a spiritual punishment of showing love. There are two major ways Shelley visualises nonviolence. These include glorifying the grandeur and the courage of nonviolent action as in "The Revolt of Islam and "Prometheus Unbound" through the imagination, and by realistically portraying the horror and futility of violence as in "The Cenci", and "Hellas". The fundamental question this article seeks to answer is why Shelley has not been acknowledged as the founder of the philosophy of nonviolence.

### 3. Shelley's Nonviolent Poetics

Shelley's prose works explore the philosophy of nonviolence and the necessity of its applicability as an ethical and pragmatic tool and weapon against injustices of all kinds. Works such as *An Address to the Irish*, *A Declaration of Rights*, and *On the Vegetable System of Diet* bear the fruits of Shelley's nonviolent vision. The prose works have a poetic dimension and are written in a language and style replete with meaning and pregnant with Shelley's philosophic imagination. Poetic dramas such as "The Revolt of Islam", "Prometheus Unbound", "The Cenci", "Oedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant", "Hellas", and "Charles I" also carry the same messages. The message is directed to specific people traumatised by violence and the misery imposed on them by the King and statesmen. However, particular emphasis is laid on his poetic works like "The Mask of Anarchy", "A Philosophical View of Reform", "Song to the Men of England", "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills", "The Triumph of Life", etc which carry his poetic and philosophic visions of nonviolence.

"The Mask of Anarchy" was written by Shelley shortly

after the Peterloo Massacre at Manchester on 16 August 1815. It is one of Shelley's masterpieces on his philosophy of non-violence. On the date stated above, a crowd of some 60,000 people peacefully gathered to hear Orator Hunt speak of reform. Unprovoked government troops stormed the crowd with an arrest warrant for Hunt. About nine people were killed and over four hundred wounded. Words of this massacre reached Shelley in early September, and by the end of the month, the enraged humanitarian completed his poem inspired by the tragic events of Manchester.

The "Mask" has three major movements in its 372 lines. The first movement is the triumphant march of King Anarchy and his followers, "Drunk as with intoxication / Of the wine of desolation / Through England to London (lines 49-50). Three of Anarchy's henchmen described in detail are "Murder" (line 5) representing Castlereagh, "Fraud" (line 14), representing "Eldon and "Hypocrisy" (line 24) who rides "On a crocodile" (line 25) representing Sidmouth. These are the people who feed on the people's sweat, "Tearing [them] up and trampling [them] down; / Till they came to London Town" (lines 52-53). By their monstrous actions and deeds, each city dweller, "panic-stricken" felt their hearts sink with terror "Hearing the tempestuous cry / Of the triumph of Anarchy" (lines 56-57) and his "hired murderers, who did sing" / Thou art God, and Law, and King. / We have waited, weak and lone / For they coming, Mighty One! / Our purses are empty, our swords / are cold, / Give us glory, and blood, and gold!" (lines 59-64) The multitude has been made slaves by the tyrannical few, through force and cunning. They forge the arms that oppress them and they acquiesce in despotic conspiracies such as "paper coin". At the arrival of Anarchy and his followers, all praise him in whispers, "Like a bad prayer not over loud" (line 68), while others run for their lives.

In the poem's second movement, Hope lies down in calm protest before the horses of Anarchy's procession, expecting her body to be crushed by the king's cruel power, as her spirit already has been. According to Desmond King-Hele, Hope's protest is an early example of the sit-down demonstration, nay, a lie-down demonstration against oppression. He declares that:

*Then she lay down in the street,  
Right before the horses' feet,  
Expecting, with a patient eye,  
Murder, Fraud, and Anarchy (lines 98-101).*

The results of this simple act are miraculous. The image of "Active Love" arises between Hope and her foes, and puts them to flight. The "patient eye" with which she sees the murderers is a symbol of resilience and resistance. The "prostrate multitude" then listens to a voice that incites them to revolutionary nonviolence, which is the poem's final movement. This prostrate position of the multitude is an indication of both their helplessness and resignation to their fate. The revolutionary voice addresses them in the following words:

'Men of England, heirs of Glory,

Heroes of unwritten story,  
 Nurslings of one mighty Mother,  
 Hopes of her, and one another;  
 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... (lines 147-156)

The men of England are compared to “Nurslings of one mighty mother”. The “mother” is the universe and all its inhabitants including man. The adjective “mighty” qualifies not only the magnificence of the universe but also the fact that it provides hope and solace to all its inhabitants and treats them equally. It is therefore wrong that some “nurslings” or offspring of the same mother should trample on others and subject them to misery. Shelley incites them to wake up from their slumber and rise to their rights. He compares them to lions that are sleeping “slumber” and that need to wake from this slumber. Their slumber is as a result of the chains in which they live. “Chains” is synonymous with misery and the poor treatment they are subjected to. They should thus break these chains, compared to “dew”, and shake it off. They allowed the dew to settle on them because they are constantly asleep and refuse to rise up to their rights. Breaking the chain and shaking off the dew is a call for a revolution, a mass revolution of the indolent “many” against the violent “few”. The contrast between the violent few and the indolent many and the possibility of overthrowing the few is signalled by the encouraging expression “Ye are many-they are few”. By addressing the many with the pronoun “Ye” and the few violent ones with “they” is a reverence for the people and a portrayal of their ability to become divine by changing their lot.

Shelley thus understands the strength and power of the maltreated many if they are united in their cause and so warns them to free themselves through nonviolent means. He cautions them not to repeat the mistakes of the French Revolution by being vengeful, and violent. As he puts it:

Then it is to feel revenge  
 Fiercely thirsting to exchange  
 Blood for blood – and wrong for wrong –  
 Do not thus when ye are strong (lines 193-196).

Rather than retaliation, the crowd, the multitude, and the oppressed will find victory through education, serenity, non-cooperation, civil disobedience and passive resistance. They should not exchange “blood for blood”. This means that they should not behave like their oppressors. Shelley thus calls them to nonviolent actions and gives them the methods to be used. He recommends that:

Let a vast assembly be,  
 And with great solemnity  
 Declare with measured words that ye  
 Are, as God made ye, free – (lines 166-169)

No matter what the tyrants do, Shelley calls on the assembly to remain steadfast and defiant. “Vast” denotes the un-

countable oppressed who, although trampled upon, should make the oppressors know, in a solemn way, that they too are human beings created, like the oppressor, in the image of God and thus have equal rights. As Shelley puts it, “Let the tyrants pour around / With quick and startling sound...” (lines 302-303), “Let the charged artillery drive / Till the dead air seems alive...” (lines 308-309). “Let the fixed bayonet / Gleam with sharp desire to wet / Its bright point in English blood...” (lines 311-313), “Let the horsemen’s scimitars / Wheel and flash, like sphereless stars...” (lines 315-316), but let the multitude not react. He calls on them to:

‘Stand ye calm and resolute,  
 Like a forest close and mute,  
 With folded arms and looks which are  
 Weapons of unvanquished war,  
 ‘And let panic, who outspeeds  
 The career of armed steeds  
 Pass, a disregarded shade  
 Through your phalanx undismayed.  
 ‘Let the laws of your own land,  
 Good or ill, between ye stand  
 Hand to hand, and foot to foot,  
 Arbiters of the dispute, (lines 319-330)

The collective nonviolent action of the oppressed is likened to forest that is thick and silent. The “folded arms” and “looks” “hand to hand” and “foot to foot” of the oppressed are symbols of their defiance before the oppressor. It also signifies that they are not afraid of the gun and that theirs is a force of argument and not the argument of force as used by the oppressor. This is a typical example of collective nonviolence in the face of violence. If in this total defiance, Anarchy and his followers, the tyrants, “dare”:

Let them ride among you there,  
 Slash, and stab, and main, and  
 hew, –  
 What they like, that let them do.  
 With folded arms and steady  
 eyes,  
 And little fear, and less surprise,  
 Look upon them as they slay  
 Till their rage has died away (lines 341-347)

“Slash”, “stab”, “maim” and “hew” are the different methods that the tyrants use to oppress and kill. Being few, Shelley contends that they will kill and main and hew, until they get tired and then withdraw. In this act of bravura and nonviolence against violence the tyrants, Shelley believes, will, despite their ferocity and thirst for blood, be defeated. He posits that:

Then they will return with shame  
 To the place from which they came,  
 And the blood thus shed will speak  
 In hot blushes on their cheek (lines 348-351)

According to Young, this is “Shelley’s most concise poetical statement of his belief in the ultimate powers of the non-violent many to be victorious over the violent few in an actual

political situation” (line 143). From a Marxist perspective, there is ultimately going to be a conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor. The final victory, Marx intimates, lies in the hands of the oppressed or the proletariat. This is what happens in this poem. The oppressor is defeated and a proletarian society takes over. This justifies Marx’s theory of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. It equally signals Shelley’s prophetic vision of a new society achieved through nonviolence. The synthesis here is the envisioned new society of equality and freedom. This kind of nonviolence is a faith too idealistic for some political strategists to conceive. It was, however, not too idealistic for Gandhi when he led the Indian Independence movement. The consequences of such nonviolent movement and passive resistance might be very far-reaching. It is estimated, for instance, that “ten thousand Indians were murdered during the struggle (for independence) while not a single Britisher was killed”. But the consequences would have been inestimable had the revolution been violent. Gandhi is quoted to have cited sections of “The Mask of Anarchy” to a large crowd gathered in commitment to nonviolence. According to Geoffrey Ashe [3] in *Gandhi*, Shelley’s poem was the specific source that suggested the tactics of mass civil disobedience and passive resistance to the nonviolent militants. “The Mask of Anarchy” openly calls for another meeting as the one just dispersed. According to Steven E. Jones [9], in an article entitled “Shelley’s Satire of Succession and Brecht’s Anatomy of Regression: “The Mask of Anarchy” and Der anachronistische Zug Oder Freiheit und Democracy” in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World* “The Mask of Anarchy” is:

*A poem in which Shelley aims to “represent” – to stand in the place of, and to speak for – the people. Shelley seeks to act as an exiled, out-of-doors representative, to figure the predicament of the people in a way that will move them to intervene in events (193-200),*

Shelley in the poem ironically implies that Murder, Fraud, and Hypocrisy wear the mask of actual politicians namely, Castlereagh, Eldon, and Sidmouth. He also asserts that the underlying reality in each case is abstract evil, mere façades of the living people. They are led by Anarchy. Structurally, the poem can be divided into two major parts. The first part is the twenty-one stanzas of the satiric masquerade, the second, after a brief transition scene, is fifty-five stanzas of exhortation. The transition consists of fifteen stanzas of allegory, the poem’s dramatic transformation scene. Emerging from this scene, the maid – Hope walks “ankle-deep in blood” anarchy lies dead, and his horse grinds “to dust” the rest of the procession. The satirical mode of the first part gives way to the exhortative mode of the final part, but only through a purgative representation of figurative violence. As Steven E. Jones puts it:

This may be Shelley’s attempt to counter, rather than merely imitate, the real violence just experienced in Manchester, but its effects are ambivalent. Precisely what happens during the poem’s transition is difficult to say; the

transformation scene takes place as it were through a veil, or a theatrical scrim [lines 195].

Conclusively, “The Mask of Anarchy” is a satire of succession that attempts to figure out the people’s intervention in the otherwise continuous descent of power. Shelley hopes for change through a radically redrawn succession.

“Song to the Men of England like “The Mask of Anarchy” also demonstrates the power of Shelleyan nonviolence, passive resistance and non-co-operation, as recommended tactics to overthrow tyranny. The poem dramatizes Shelley’s position of support to the masses. It begins by asking a series of questions. Why do England’s men labour and suffer so that the rich can be idle and indolent on the fruits of their toil? It then states the fact of oppression and its solution, summarised in the following stanza:

The seed ye sow, another reaps;  
The wealth ye find, another keeps;  
The robes ye weave, another wears;  
The arms ye forge, another bears (lines 17-20).

The “Men of England the proletariats or the “Bees of England” are contrasted sharply with the “lords”, “tyrants”, “ungrateful drones”, and “stingless drones”. The “Bees of England”, “sow”, “find”, “weave” and “forge”, whereas the indolent and “ungrateful” drone “reaps”, “keeps”, “wears”, and “bears” all that they have not worked for. According to Shelley, the remedy to such “plough” and “toil” lies in non-cooperation and civil disobedience.

Sow seed, -but let no tyrant reap;  
Find wealth, -let no impostor heap;  
Weave robes, -let not the idle wear;  
Forge arms, -in your defence to bear (lines 21-24).

The poem simply demands that the people should stop supporting the economic despotism that oppresses them, and suggests that such despotism that is presently supported by the toil of others will fall of its weight.

One, however, has the impression that Shelley’s verse line, “Forge arms, -in your defence to bear”, is a call for violence against violence. Young, on the contrary, thinks that the statement is “not so much a call to fight violence against violence, as it is a shifting of perspective on a fact of political life” (line 153). What the statement means is that if the Men of England are going to forge arms, they should not be silly enough to give the arms to their oppressors and tyrants as they have been doing. They should keep the arms for their defence. This brings to mind the question of violence in nonviolent resistance. Although Gandhi [7], for instance preached non-violence, frequently and fortnightly he addressed himself to the question of violence in revolution. In his essay “The Doctrine of the Sword”, he states:

*I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. Thus, when my eldest son asked me what he should have done, had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908, whether he should have run away and seen me killed or whether he should have used physical force which he*

*called not and wanted to use, and defended me, I told him that it was his duty to defend me even by using violence. Hence also do I advocate training in arms for those who believe in the method of violence. I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should in a cowardly manner become & remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour.*

*But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment.*

What Gandhi means, and which is manifest in Shelley's poem, is that if the capacity for non-violent self-defence is lacking, "there need be no hesitation in using violent means" (19). Shelley's could actively support the cause of revolution in Greece and yet lament that the revolutionaries were not wise and imaginative enough to see the "preferability" of non-violent tactics to violent ones. The point I am anxious to make here is the distinction between absolute pacifism and non-violence. Non-violence must not become a weapon of tyranny, as Christianity had become and used as a moralistic doctrine by despots to enslave the people willingly and peacefully in chains of degradation. Like Martin Luther King Jr. [10] writes in *Why We Can't Wait*:

*I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.... [so, there is] the need for nonviolent gadflies to create a kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.*

Although Shelley recognises that the people have the constitutional "right of insurrection" which is "derived from the employment of armed force to counteract the will of the nation" (*Philosophical View of Reform*, VII, 533) he, however, pleads passionately against the people turning to this "last resort", and that is the case in "Song to the Men of England"

"Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills" composed in October 1818 is one of those poems in which Shelley clearly expresses what Wilfred Owen calls "The Pity of It", the pity that wars and conflicts "distil". Shelley in this beautiful lyric song is sensitive and sensible to the alternation of day and night and the circular movement of history from tyranny to tyranny. His desperation arises less out of his clear vision of the tragedy of historical circumstances, but more out of man's apparent inability to transcend this alternation of violence with violence and tyranny with tyranny. He contends that:

*Men must reap the things they sow,  
Force from force must ever flow,  
Or worse; but 'tis a bitter woe  
That love or reason cannot change  
The despot's rage, the slave's revenge (Stanza 7, lines 26-30).*

According to Shelley, man must develop the power and the will to shape an existence for himself. Such an existence should conquer the deadly circles of humanity's history, one which refuses to be part of this circular violence, tyranny and revenge. Instead of kow-towing and submitting to the tyranny

of life, man can perhaps escape to what Shelley describes as:

*...Some calm and blooming cove,  
Where for me and those I Love  
May a windless bower be built  
Far from passion, pain and guilt (lines 9-12)*

For this socially minded poet, what sounds like an escape to an island retreat is in no way an escape from humanity. Rather it is an invitation for humanity to join him in this nonviolent utopian "calm and blooming cove" so that in that world of imagination:

*We may live happy there,  
That the Spirits of the Air,  
Envyng us, may even entice  
To our healing Paradise  
The polluting multitude;  
But their rage would be subdued  
By that clime divine and calm,  
And the winds whose wings rain balm  
On the uplifted soul, and leaves  
Under which the bright sea heaves:  
While each breathless interval  
In their whisperings musical  
The inspired soul supplies  
With its own deep melodies,  
And the lovewhich heals of strife,  
Circling, like the breath of life,  
All things in that sweet abode  
With its own mild brotherhood;  
They, not it, would change; and soon  
Every sprite beneath the moon  
Would repent its envy vain,  
And the earth grows young again. (lines 18-39)*

Shelley thinks that the universe can be a paradise. His invitation for man to join him in this earthly paradise is both vegetarian and a plea for nonviolence. This imaginative paradise may also entice the "polluting multitude". The polluting multitude is a synonym for the oppressor who is also capable of being good, in the image of God.

"The Triumph of Life", the unfinished last poem of Shelley would have contained the same basic thematic structure as "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills", but it is more elaborately developed and dramatically presented. The central figure in the poem is "the Car of Life" which moves in all directions, and drags the chained human beings, its victims, wherever it goes. The only two figures that escape those chains of enslavement are Socrates and Christ. They are among the "sacred few" to escape. Apart from them, the "deluded" spirit of Rousseau answers the question posed by Shelley to know "those who are chained to the car":

*The wise,  
'The great, the unforgotten, - they who wore  
Mitres and helms and crowns, or wreaths of light,  
Signs of thought's empire over thought - their lore  
'Taught them not this, to know themselves; their might  
Could not repress the mystery within,*

*And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night  
"Caught them are evening" (lines 150-157).*

Those who are chained on to the Car of life are those who dedicated their lives to the world and never knew themselves. "Mitres", "helms", "crowns", and "wreaths of light" refer to kings and statesmen who oppress the innocent man. They forgot that they are made in the image of God and that they are not different from other men in the universe. Since they did not know themselves, life bore them sightlessly through existence. Because they loved the things of the world, like "fame" and "greatness", they lost "peace" and "virtue". Carl Woodring [22], in *Politics in English Romantic Poetry*, says that "To know yourself, means to avoid dominion over others, thus to escape life's dominion over you, and in the effect to love your neighbour". Socrates and Christ are not part of the enslaved many. This is a depiction of their exemplary non-violent lives, imaginatively comprehended by the poet. It is by loving one's neighbour as one loves oneself that one can be free and escape from this Car of life, and for Shelley man only needs to will and so will it be. In order words, Love is innate in every man, and all man needs to do is to develop the love in him, love himself and show the love to others (neighbours). In this case, there will be no violence in the world. Those who have failed to know themselves, according to Shelley, include among others Napoleon, Voltaire, Frederick the Great, Emperor Paul of Russia, Catherine the Great, Leopold II, Pope Gregory, Saint John, Caesar, Constantine, Aristotle, and Alexander the Great. To these people should be added Plato and Rousseau who are also chained to the car of life. Like Young says, Rousseau is chained to the Car because "he loved himself more than his neighbour". The spirit of Rousseau in "The Triumph of Life" can be considered as one of those misdirected spirits categorised thus by Shelley in his "Preface" to "Alastor":

*Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted) perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt. All else, and torpid, are those unforeseeing multitudes who constitute, together with their own, the lasting misery and loneliness of the world. Those who love not their fellow-beings live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave (line 15).*

"The Triumph of Life" ends with the question "Then What is Life?" (line 344). From a purely Shelleyan perspective, life for a majority of mankind is selfishness, for the misdirected few, it is searching for the things of another world, and for the sacred few, it is like Young puts it "self-mastery through brotherly love" (line 158). For the sacred few, the state of existence is not static but dynamic. It is a continuous struggle against the corrupting and degrading life of the world in an unquenchable attempt to fully realise the sacredness of humanity. Put differently therefore, life is not what it is, an alternation of violence, tyranny, and selfishness. Life is supposed to be a fountain of universal love that flows in every

human heart, producing as such a non-violent spirit that permeates the universe for a harmonious living. Such is the position of Shelley.

Shelley's other anthologised sonnets are designed to provoke an imaginative response compatible with the spirit of non-violence. "Ozymandias" for instance, indicts the vanity of men who build an empire on power and wealth rather than on peace and love. Ozymandias, the king, is a symbol of tyranny and vanity, a king who was not to be trifled with as the words "frown", "sneer", and "cold command" suggest. But in the face of his ruthless and tyrannical rule, his death reveals the vanity of human power and tyranny. Of all he stood for, (tyrannical, fearful, violent, oppressive and repressive), he has fallen with his kingdom, and nothing remains of him but his "shattered visage" (line 4) and the epitaph that stands in "the desert" (line 3) stresses the vanity of power. It reads:

*'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away (lines 10-14).*

Shaddrach Ambanasom [2] has an interesting interpretation of the poem. He reveals meaning through a study of the poem's diction. As he puts it, when the narrator starts talking:

*we notice the use of words of emotion: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone...". The noun is "legs" but solidly qualified by strong adjectives "vast", "trunkless", "of stone", which tell us that these were huge legs that were once very strong but which today are without a strong body; we are talking of a broken statue. Near these legs lies a partially buried "shattered" face.... It is as if God himself came down to earth in one form or the other to teach Ozymandias a lesson by administering his statue a crushing, devastating blow....*

Ambanasom goes ahead to frame the message of the poem in his own words through the following lyrical lines:

*Tyrants, be not proud!  
Nothing made by man is indestructible  
Nor earthly kingdom lasts forever  
Dictators, know then your limit!  
For all is vanity!*

The point in "Ozymandias" is that underneath this exposition of tyranny and its vanity is the unspoken Shelleyan suggestion that "Intellectual beauty" characterized by love and nonviolence is the ultimate that all must seek and at all times.

This same basic punch line is extrapolated in another sonnet, "England in 1819". The poem indicts the blind tyranny of kings and priests who rule by the "two-edged swords" of violence and whose death may bring the dawning of a brighter day. It is a critique against the king, his off-springs, the politicians, the priest, and others who "starve" and "stab" the people. The poem has two categories of people. On the one hand, "the king", the "princes", "rulers", and the religious personalities, and on the other hand the "people". This echoes

the Shelleyan statement “Ye are many, they are few” and sets a thesis and an anti-thesis. The thesis here from the Marxist perspective is the first category:

*An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king, -  
Princes, the dregs of their full race, who flow  
Through public scorn, -mud from a muddy spring, -  
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,  
But leech-like to their fainting country cling (line 1-5).*

This category of persons in the theory of Marx constitutes the ruling class. They make “Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay” (line 10). The religion practiced is “Christless, Godless” (line 11), and the “Senate” is like a statute, unable to make any laws that can favour the people.

The antithesis is the “people” (line 6), nay the masses who are “starved and stabbed in the untilled field”, -(line 6). The underlying point to be unearthed here is that while the higher class is all powerful, the lower class is all weak. Although the latter labours, his fruits are enjoyed by the former. This is bound to create a situation of conflict between the two classes. The result of this conflicting situation will be a kind of synthesis, a harmonised society where all are equal and thus share the same privileges and advantages. Whereas Marx preaches a proletarian revolution, Shelley thinks that a revolution is not necessary because the oppressors, though “to their fainting country cling” (line 5) will themselves collapse as suggested in the line “Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow” (line 6).

Although the word “blood” may denote violence, the ensuing expression “without a blow” suggests non-violence. In other words, the violence of the ruling class is confronted with the powerful non-violence of the working class. Even if they are killed, from their graves will “burst” a “glorious Phantom” that “may illumine our tempestuous day”, thus the synthesis, and the mystical power of non-violence. Ambanason considers the last two lines of the poem (the heroic couplet) as “the turning point in the sonnet”. Truly it is. According to him, “For all the bleakness painted, the hopes that the immorality, wickedness, and inhumanity will end up producing a revolution that from the graves of those victimised a revolution will emerge to put things right” (line 115). It will be a simplification of Shelleyan ideology and philosophy of non-violence to think that the word “revolution” here means violence. On the contrary, it means “change”, “without a blow”, and this change will come when the oppressors will be in their graves – the grave which symbolises the end of an era and the annihilation of a system, violent and tyrannical as it might have been. This same grave also signals a new birth.

Apart from Shelley’s sonnets, and the examples discussed above, Shelley’s political odes also denounce temporal powers that rule over men by fear, and prophesy the founding of political liberty when man comes to truly know himself and love all humankind. In “An Ode Written October, 1819, Before the Spaniards Had Recovered Their Liberty”, Shelley pleads to the Spanish to master the passions of revenge and pride on which tyrannies are built. “Ode to Liberty” is a study

of history as a cycle of tyranny begetting tyranny and the enslaving of the oppressed. Like the first two odes, “Ode to Naples” is a passionate cry from the non-violent poet to the peoples of Naples to put their trust in the “Great Spirit, deepest Love” in their struggle for freedom. In all of these poems and many more, Shelley does not waver in his trust that non-violence, if accepted by the majority of people, would create a better society. He thus spent his life in communicating the human grandeur of his vision.

Apart from the poems, Shelley’s great dramas also illuminate his philosophic vision of the essence of nonviolence in human society. They are his strong desire to communicate to more people his vision of truth and nonviolence and this is why we include them in this study. Shelley’s major poetic dramas like “The Cenci”, “Oedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant”, “Hellas, and “Charles I” are representations of the Shelleyan vision of nonviolence. They also demonstrate, especially “The Cenci”, the Shelleyan criticism of evil responding to evil, (exemplified by Beatrice) as well as Shelley’s promotion of fulfilled love through will, as seen in the eyes and actions of Prometheus in “Prometheus Unbound”. Whichever way we look at it, Shelley in his dramas as in his poetry and prose, brings out the tyranny of mankind against man but shuns revenge and violence as a response to oppression.

In sum therefore, Shelley’s nonviolence as seen in the poems, lyric dramas, political pamphlets and other works is an ethical and pragmatic philosophy of life used in the fight against oppression, repression, dictatorship, totalitarianism and miseries of all kinds. Nonviolence, characterised by non-cooperation and civil disobedience, is as such a basic life principle propounded by Percy Bysshe Shelley and taken over years later by Mahatma Gandhi. The fundamental and unanswered questions are why Shelley has not been credited with the philosophy of nonviolence, why Gandhi did not acknowledge Shelley and did both men know each other, read each other? Who inspired who?

#### 4. Shelley and Gandhi

Shelley was born on 04 August 1792 and died on 08 July 1822, one month short of his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Mahatma Gandhi, on the other hand, was born on 2 October 1869 and died on 30 January 1948. This means that Gandhi was far younger than Shelley given that he was born when Shelley would have been 77 years had he been alive. In other words, Gandhi was born 77 years after Shelley’s birth and 47 years after his death. What this means is that Mahatma Gandhi and Percy Bysshe Shelley did not overlap in their lifetimes, so they did not have the opportunity to know each other directly.

However, having explored Shelley’s nonviolence philosophy above, it is evident that Mahatma Gandhi was not only inspired by Shelley’s writings but might have also greatly admired him and his philosophy of nonviolence on which Gandhi’s philosophy is pegged.

Gandhi was particularly drawn to Shelley's poetry, which he believed embodied the spirit of freedom and non-violent resistance. Suhrud Tridip Suhrud, [19] in an interview in *Words Without Borders* opines that Gandhi was so inspired by Shelley's work that he named his ashram in Ahmedabad, India, after Shelley's poems and translated some of them into Gujarati, one of the official languages of India.

Without extensively comparing the nonviolent philosophies of Shelley and Gandhi, broad areas of similarity in the thinking of these two non-violent reformers are suggested. The conclusion arrived at is that Mahatma Karamchand Gandhi might have been influenced in his non-violent philosophy by Percy Bysshe Shelley. The metaphysics of Shelley's non-violence, with its belief in a dynamic universe and the oneness of all life, may have been formulated by his contact with Indian thought and later enriched and confirmed by his subsequent reading of Plato and the New Testament. According to Amiyakumar Sen [17] in *Studies in Shelley*, Shelley discovered from Hindu tradition that "the World of sense is...a monstrous imagery woven by the pervading spirit. Its appearances are unsubstantial and they envelop ultimate reality as a veil". In the chapter entitled "Shelley and Indian Thought", Sen discusses the use Shelley makes of Indian images and symbols in his poetry especially in "Queen Mab", "Alastor", "Prometheus Unbound" and "Hellas". (line 243-270)

S. R. Swaminathan's [20] article "Possible Indian Influence on Shelley in *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin, IX*, like Sen's work, provides interesting additional information on Shelley's Indian attachment. Shelley's reading of Edward Moor's [13] *The Hindu Pantheon*, a work he is known to have ordered and received from his book-seller, for instance, may have helped him formulate his various symbols of the serpent and the eagle in combat, an image which is illustrated in Moor's book.

There is no specific evidence available to demonstrate that Gandhi at the beginning of his career read any of Shelley's writings. There is, however, ample evidence that Gandhi was in intimate contact with Shelley's thought at the time when he was formulating his own philosophy of life. John Pollard Guinn [8] in *Shelley's Political Thought* concludes, after reading the "Indian Opinion", a periodical published by Gandhi for the year 1903-1914, that:

*Judging from these facts concerning Gandhi's schooling and reading taste and habits and the fact that Shelley is not mentioned in any of the issues of Indian Opinion, we may safely conclude that he did not become acquainted with Shelley until sometime after 1914, the year which marked the end of his South African campaign.*

But Geoffrey Ashe [3], whose biography of Gandhi was published a year earlier than Guinn's study of Shelley but which was probably not available to Guinn before completing his book, provides ample evidence that: "Gandhi as a young law student in England (1888-1892) was frequently exposed to Shelley's ethical and political principles". This statement is corroborated by Art Young [23] who adds that:

*After arriving in England, Gandhi was profoundly moved by his reading of a series of vegetarian tracts by prominent Britishers). The most influential of these tracts was Henry Salt's "A Plea for Vegetarianism" in which food reform is related to reform of society in general. Shelley, Thoreau and Ruskin are all appreciatively cited in support of Salt's plea for vegetarianism and social reform. At this time, Gandhi also read Anna Kingsford's 'The Perfect Way in Diet' and Howard Williams' 'The Ethics of Diet', and as in Salt's pamphlet, he "encountered Shelley hymned...as an arch-prophet for the modern world [23].*

Young intimates that in 1890, Gandhi joined the London Vegetarian Society, many of whose members, such as Salt and George Bernard Shaw, were Society. The philosophical nucleus of the group that surrounded Salt, according to Ashe was "the simple life" based on a "highly moral socialism" in which "love was to be supreme" (line 34). He adds that "Nonviolence, and nonviolent protest by civil disobedience, were ideas already planted by Shelley and Thoreau, though civil disobedience remained almost entirely untried" (line 34).

The years Gandhi spent in London considered by Ashe as the "London Phase" are said to be "decisive" (line 40) in Gandhi's life. Ashe again states that "Prometheus Unbound" is the "most Gandhian of all long poems" (line 212) and he even speculates that Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" may have influenced and "directly given Gandhi the ideas of mass civil disobedience and passive resistance" (lines 103-105).

Percy Shelley wrote this poem after hearing of the tragic event known as the Massacre of Peterloo. More than a hundred working men, women and children were seriously injured when they staged a public meeting to determine how to achieve reform through "the most legal and effectual means." Like many others, Percy Shelley was furious over this naked governmental oppression and seized the opportunity to write what is now considered, "the greatest poem of political protest ever written in English."

According to Ageeva, [1] when Gandhi read the poem, he was instantly captivated by its message for freedom through peace. He ascertains that "It is known that Gandhi would often quote various passages from the poem to vast audiences during the campaign for India's independence" [2]. Mathew C Borushko [4] holds that Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" is associated with nonviolence or one of its approximate cognates "Passive resistance" or "civil disobedience". Quoting from Timothy Morton [14], Borushko affirms that "The Mask" played "a pivotal role in inspiring Mahatma Mohandas K. Gandhi's nonviolent work in South Africa as well as the student-led protest in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in 1989". He further stresses that "At a press conference, Gandhi recited the poem's exhortation, "Stand ye calm and resolute" (line 319), as well as its final challenge, "And if then the tyrants dare / Let them ride among you there, / Slash and stab, and maim, and hew" (lines 344-46)?" This is to say that Shelley's and Gandhi's take that the tyrants would have to "dare" to use force, reveals the potential of nonviolence to expose the vio-

lence upon which power depends.

Confusing, however, is the fact that Gandhi occasionally and approvingly did mention Shelley, but like Young asks, “why didn’t he specifically credit Shelley’s influence on him as he did Thoreau’s, Ruskin’s, and Tolstoy’s? As mentioned earlier, Thoreau, Ruskin, Tolstoy and Shelley all belonged to both the Fabian and the London Vegetarian Society and Gandhi knew each of them, having been part of the same societies. His leaving out Shelley’s name among those who influenced him is a point to ponder over. Ashe suggests, as quoted by Young, that Gandhi might have suffered “a Freudian lapse of memory” as a result of his [Gandhi’s] “disapproval of Shelley’s sexual principles”. Ashe also establishes, reasonably, that Gandhi in “England frequently read Shelley” and, as Young quotes him, it is more than likely that Gandhi “often heard [Shelley] affectionately spoken about by others” [23].

Be it as it may, one thing is certain, namely that Gandhi was intellectually dishonest. People and especially great thinkers are not acknowledged because of their ethics or lack of it. Intellectual probity is sacrosanct. No matter what perception anyone had or has of Shelley, his ideas and philosophy of life have intensely shaped socio-political and ethical behaviours in a universe where moral insufficiencies and deviant socio-political behaviours have left whole communities and peoples wallowing in abject poverty and gruesome pain, thus fertile grounds for collective nonviolent uprisings.

Without mincing words, the treatment given to Shelley has been iniquitous. Like Mary Shelley opined, the criticisms levied on this poet, her husband, “generous to imprudence, devoted to heroism” (ix) are lopsided. In the “Preface by Mrs. Shelley to the First Collected Edition, 1839” of Hutchinson’s *Shelley: Poetical Works* she stresses that Shelley has been judged partially. She insists that if he were judged impartially by critics “his character would stand in fairer and brighter light than that of any of his contemporary”. She stresses that without the negative and partial criticism, the exalted nature of Shelley’s “soul would have raised him into something divine”

## 5. Conclusion

Tamara Ageeva [1] holds that “Percy Shelley is so underrated that it hurts. Shelley was the first to encourage peaceful protests in overthrowing tyrannical governments and this had inspired Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama and others.” [4] She adds that Shelley’s legacy “is being the first to pioneer peaceful protests that toppled regimes”. It so hurts because it is difficult to comprehend how a man whose singular poem, “The Masque of Anarchy” has been the source of peaceful political revolutions that have toppled undemocratic regimes, has not been credited with such milestone political philosophy. According to Ageeva “Percy Shelley’s poem had even influenced the Egyptian revolution of 2011, with protestors chanting the lines, “Rise,

like lions after slumber, / In unvanquishable number!”.

In 2024, this poem is still very relatable to modern events. We have seen many people throughout the world rising up in protest. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests after the racial killing of George Floyd that began in Minneapolis in the United States on May 26, 2020, the Beirut explosion followed by mass protests against corruption and protests in Belarus against government oppression are a few examples. The quote “Ye are many — they are few!” in “The Masque of Anarchy” is used as we speak in every socio-political conflicting situation and Shelley’s vision inscribed on his ring, IL BUON TEMPO VERRA (THE GOOD TIME SHALL COME) resonates in the universe with telling finality. With this knowledge, Percy Bysshe Shelley is thus exhumed and resurrected ad infinitum.

## Author Contributions

George Ewane Ngide is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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