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Themes: Themes and Meanings

Shelley's *Mont Blanc* is one of the most philosophical of all landscape poems; it is also among the greatest. It is partly a reply to William Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798), in which both the type of landscape described and the implications suggested by it are much cozier. Both poems deal with the human mind, but Shelley (unlike Wordsworth) is not concerned with its development through childhood to maturity. Instead, he takes for granted a richly endowed adult mind that simultaneously perceives and abstracts. Unlike Wordsworth, he is not fundamentally concerned with memory. Thus, one not only sees the poet's mind at work, creating the very poem one is reading, but one also sees his mind analyzing itself. It is clear that the mind in question is both rational and creative.

Besides analyzing itself, the poet's mind also analyzes nature, particularly in its relations to humankind. That nature strongly influences human thought is both implied and assumed; for one thing, nature is often beautiful and therefore attracts one's attention. Shelley records no evidence to suggest that natural beauty is in any way purposeful, however; for him, no divine being deliberately created an aesthetically pleasing world for the enjoyment of its human inhabitants. Nor is nature a moral teacher (as Wordsworth held), except in ways that typical nature-lovers had never recognized.

The world of Mont Blanc—which, for Shelley, encompasses the entire earth—is fundamentally indifferent to either the survival or the happiness of humankind. Any benefits it bestows upon humans are therefore not divine favors but mere accidents. The outstanding difference between nature and man, for Shelley, is that nature endures throughout time whereas man does not. This is the real lesson to be learned from nature (lines 92-100).

Yet Shelley does not ultimately concede. In the final stanza, he confronts Mont Blanc straightforwardly, both as a fact and as a symbol. He sees the height, the power, the coldness, and the isolation of Mont Blanc and celebrates them (in lines 139-141). The material universe, already seen to be eternal, is infinite as well (lines 60, 140). Yet in a strikingly abrupt conclusion—three lines that ultimately outweigh all the rest of the poem—a shocking reversal takes place, as Shelley taunts the gigantic mountain by pointing out that its only significance (indeed, nature's only significance) is that given to it by the human mind. In this sense, then, the eternal universe in which humans live is constantly being re-created according to human dictates.

Analysis: The Poem

Mont Blanc is a meditative and descriptive poem in five unequal stanzas of irregularly rhymed iambic pentameter. As with several of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poems, scholars still dispute important details regarding its text. An early title specifies that the poem was conceived "at the extremity of the vale of Servoz"; a later subtitle has it "written in the vale of Chamouni," which is a trough-like valley at the base of

Mont Blanc. Mont Blanc itself is a stupendous sight as one comes upon it suddenly around a bend of the ravine through which the river Arve (originating in one of the glaciers of Mont Blanc) runs. Shelley probably stood on a bridge (the Pont de Pellisier) crossing the ravine to contemplate the scene. In his day, Mont Blanc was thought to be the highest mountain in Europe. From the bridge, it looms before the observer as one of the most dramatic views anywhere in the Alps; it is noted for its height, its formidably jagged rocks, its unforgettable glaciers, and the eerie whiteness from which it derives its name.

The first stanza of *Mont Blanc* reflects on the human mind itself, comparing it to the ravine of the Arve over which the poet is standing. The Arve flows through the ravine as influences from the material world flow through the mind, like a stream of consciousness. The river and the ravine have shaped each other, but the extent to which each has shaped the other is unclear. The second stanza is a more tangible demonstration of the thought process described in the first. The Arve now is specifically described as Power, meaning not only the material power of matter in motion, but also the power of nature to influence the mind, even to the extent of creating poetry.

In the third stanza, the poet/narrator turns his attention from the ravine below him to the domineering mountain directly ahead and above him. Like everyone else, he is awestruck, almost hypnotized, as he contemplates its impersonal command of the entire scene. Dominating even the lesser mountains by which it is flanked, Mont Blanc appears to transcend all the limits of earthly existence, especially the shortlived mortality of mankind. Despite attempts by the intellectualizing poet to find some kind of beginning for the mountain (through earthquakes or volcanic eruptions), it seems virtually eternal.

Stanza 4 then pointedly contrasts the mortality of man and his works with the timelessness of the material world and its “primeval” (existing from the beginning) mountains. Most of the stanza is devoted to a vivid description of Mont Blanc’s glaciers, which are inexorably destructive of anything human placed in their paths to oppose them. The closing lines paradoxically affirm the hydrological cycle, in which snow, ice, glaciers, the Arve (a river derived from the glaciers but bringing fertility to man), the ocean, and the water evaporated from it are all seen to be one.

Finally, stanza 5 sums up Shelley’s profound meditation upon Mont Blanc, power, and human existence by first acknowledging the power of nature and then surprisingly but effectively disputing it by championing the primacy of the human mind over any manifestation of the material world.

Analysis: Forms and Devices

Mont Blanc is a difficult poem, in part because Shelley attempted to capture within it the very rapid workings of his own mind. At several points, the poem seems unfinished, abandoned rather than perfected. For this reason, one’s reading of it should probably depend more upon the major images it evokes than upon the precision of its sometimes uncertain language.

The poem abounds with symbolic landforms, some of which cannot be precisely identified or related altogether coherently with others. In stanza 1, for example, lines 6-11 constitute an elaborate simile based upon some landscape not immediately at hand (though perhaps a version of the same scenery that is developed later on). Both the “feeble brook” of line 7 and the “vast river” of line 10 are products of “secret springs” (line 4) and have something to do with human thought; none of this, however, is very clear. The most usual reading is that the “vast river” is the same as the “universe of things” flowing through the mind in lines 1 to 4. If so, then the human mind is dominated by passively received sense impressions (as in the philosophy of John Locke) rather than by its own autonomous creations. Throughout the poem, however, one sees the mind regularly allegorizing the world of nature and thereby giving it a significance that it would not otherwise possess.

In his gripping natural descriptions throughout the poem, Shelley utilizes a category of landscape aesthetics already denominated in the eighteenth century as the sublime. Its complementary opposite is the picturesque, in which (like a modern tourist) one was invited to stand in precisely the right spot so as to see before one a natural scene resembling a landscape painting, with foreground, background, side curtains, and a center of interest all in order, as if arranged by a master artist. Such views commonly celebrated God's creative talent, reaffirmed traditional religious belief, and consequently spared the observer any troublesome awareness that his outlook may have become obsolete. It was different with the sublime, which emphasized the amoral power of nature and its heedlessness of mankind. Far from reassuring and safeguarding the observer, the sublime tended instead to emphasize his helplessness, destabilizing him both physically and intellectually.

One sees the contrast between these two modes of landscape perception most obviously in stanza 3, lines 76 to 83. They too are puzzling, in part because of a major crux (textual difficulty) in line 79, where Shelley wrote "In such a faith" in one version and "But for such faith" in the later and generally accepted one. Do they mean the same thing, or did Shelley change his mind? The kind of faith involved is undoubtedly William Wordsworth's rather than that of Christian orthodoxy; in any case, the stanza's last lines refer to the Mountain's "voice." Shelley apparently wavered here between accepting a benign, Wordsworthian view of nature and the harsher, perhaps more realistic one that he then affirms so impressively in stanza 4.