

LIFTING THE VEIL AND SEE(K)ING HIDDEN BEAUTY IN
SHELLEY'S "LIFT NOT THE PAINTED VEIL"

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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On first read, "Lift Not the Painted Veil" supposedly instruct the reader to not lift the painted veil called life as it only is a mirage/mirror of reality painted to convince people that it is truth; however, this reading is too literal and fails to reveal the power behind the ambiguities that exist between the lines. I utilize Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* and his close analysis of the awe-full ability poetic language has on its subject and apply his theory to "Lift Not the Painted Veil" and, in doing so, I illustrate the way Shelley utilizes language to provoke philosophical, visual, and affective moments of expression in his early sonnet. "Lift Not the Painted Veil" emphasizes the importance of apprehending a hidden beauty when attempting to break free from the monotony of life. By apprehending this poem and allowing the poetic language to overwhelm us, we can begin to find truth.

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“Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world,
and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar”
—Shelley, *Defense of Poetry*

Shelley often discusses the veil of life and how poets, through writing, can help individuals experience overwhelming affect and lift the veil, writing: “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (Shelley, *Defense*). By apprehending “Lift Not the Painted Veil,” the poem ruptures our ideas of life, the life we accept and believe we live; however, the lifting of the veil only happens fleetingly. To “apprehend” in terms of poetry goes beyond simply perceiving meaning, but rather being seized; a grasping of the mind or idea where the subject is possessed by the image and cannot escape the sensations that overwhelm them. Shelley’s sonnet “Lift Not the Painted Veil” provides a lens by which we can begin to apprehend life and the hidden beauties of which we are blind. Here, to apprehend Shelley’s sonnet is to go beyond mere comprehension or understanding and be seized within the sensations that arise when lifting the veil and experiencing sensations that no longer hold meaning. Ross Wilson writes *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* and explores what Shelley means by the enigmatic phrase: “apprehension of life.” In doing so, Wilson traces the many ways Shelley’s inscrutable phrase can be interpreted from feeling without intellect to a combination of knowledge and sensation that seizes the subject (Wilson 14). The lifting of the veil occurs when beauty and affect consume us, opening our eyes to the wonders of life, rendering us powerless in capturing those sensations to hold and describe to others as truth, for all of this critical discussion of Shelleyan “life,” a crucial dimension gets overlooked: life is available only as an image: “a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (Shelley, *Defense*). Shelley’s early sonnet emphasizes a form of reading which stresses apprehension

over comprehension in order to lift the painted veil. Thus, when we lift the veil of the world, perhaps tears will escape, or perhaps you will shriek and clasp your hands, or perhaps goosebumps will appear, or perhaps you will just be overwhelmed by fear and hope.¹

Lift not the painted veil which those who live
Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,
And it but mimic all we would believe
With colors idly spread--behind, lurk Fear
And Hope, twin Destinies; who ever weave
Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear.
I knew one who had lifted it--he sought,
For his lost heart was tender, things to love,
But found them not, alas! nor was there aught
The world contains, the which he could approve.
Through the unheeding many he did move,
A splendor among shadows, a bright blot
Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove
For truth, and like the Preacher found it not.

There are, essentially, two subjects in the poem: those who do not lift the veil (those who live without apprehending the hidden beauty in the world) and those who have lifted the veil (those who have experienced paralyzing affective moments). On first read, "Lift Not the Painted Veil" seems to offer the reader a set of instructions: the reader must not lift the painted veil called life as it only is a mirage/mirror of reality painted to convince people that it is life. Underneath the veil is a darkness filled with fear and hope equally. The speaker then tells the reader that he knew someone with a gentle heart who lifted the veil who looked (with hope) for things to love but didn't find anything in the world that he could agree with. He was admirable and moved through many unthinking people, but it wasn't worth it

¹ In my experience, these moments of profound beauty happened to me when I read and reread poems such as John Keats' "This Living Hand Now Warm and Capable," ee cummings' "somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond," Percy Shelley's "Mutability," Lord Byron's "Darkness," and of course Shelley's "Lift Not the Painted Veil." In reading and rereading these poems, I found myself pulled into the language, unable to escape the language and images that appeared before me. I could not escape the sensations that these poems provoked and, in those indescribable moments, I felt I saw the hidden beauty of the world

because he couldn't, like preachers, find truth. However, this negative reading of the poem is shallow and insufficient because it lacks the apprehension of life that Shelley hints at within the poetic language. In other words, this reading is too literal and fails to reveal the power behind the ambiguities that exist between the lines. The initial reading misses the images of the "twin Destinies; who ever weave / Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear" that would paralyze those who lift the veil. "Lift Not the Painted Veil" emphasizes the importance of apprehending the beauty in poetry and life when attempting to break free from the monotony of life.

In spite of Shelley's cautious instructions in the sonnet, the poem's images actually take us to the very experience it warns us against. By describing the two affects that lie behind the veil, Fear and Hope, Shelley provides the reader with the visions and images we are blind to; the reader then only needs to apprehend the poem in order to truly perceive these overwhelming sensations. In other words, with the flames of Fear and Hope, the reader can begin to step toward embodying these somewhat uneasy experiences. Only from lifting the veil and revealing these twin destinies can the reader truly experience these feelings. Therefore, in the moments when fear paralyzes our spirits or hope elates our skin the veil is lifted, even if just for a moment. To experience both is to see an unfamiliar and hidden beauty of the world. Shelley suggests that the reader lift the veil, despite the title and the poem containing the caution "lift *not* the painted veil" in order to become a Spirit, a Splendor, a Bright Blot and to apprehend an overwhelming beauty in truth. Peter Huhn is one of the few scholars to have written extensively on Shelley's "Lift Not the Painted Veil," and he argues that Shelley's sonnet splits the speaker's identity into two consciousness in order to separate himself from the one who failed to lift the veil: "ultimately, these two perspectives

not only refer to the same concept of reality but also show the same type of consciousness,” and that “by having the speaker externalize this disturbing experience, Shelley creates a shift in perspective which enables him to hide the self-referentiality of the speaking voice; the speaker can dissociate himself from the very source of his dilemma and even attempt to protect others from it” (Huhn 239-240). Huhn later argues that the reason Shelley warns the reader to not lift the veil is to prevent “man fall[ing] victim to nihilism,” and states that the reader should avoid this negative ending (Huhn 240). If Huhn argues that lifting the veil is ultimately negative, for the reader will either fall into nihilistic thought or the reader will fail to find truth in the end, I go beyond his reading to say that if the reader reads “Lift Not the Painted Veil,” and go against Shelley’s perceived warning, the reader can find a new way to apprehend life that includes experiencing affective moments that seize us and lift the veil to the beauty in the world.

Although the reader may read “Lift Not the Painted Veil” and heed Shelley’s warning to not lift the veil, the poem teases and lures, almost flirtingly, the reader to lift the veil because in the end, as the poem suggests, those who lift the veil can become “A splendor among shadows, a bright blot / Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove / For truth” (Shelley 11-14).² If the reader follow the poem’s own temptation and lift the veil, the reader will experience being a “splendor among shadows” who goes against the “unheeding many” and begin to apprehend life; however, the reader cannot simply pry the veil from our eyes. The poem offers the blueprint for the very thing it seems caution against. The veil hides from us the wonders of life. The veil is our common, habitual lives and our ordinary use of

² Veils themselves can be an alluring object in which we want to lift either from our eyes or someone else’s eyes, such as those used in weddings. Now, we can also think of the seduction in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* and the dance of the seven veils.

language. The veil is our acceptance of the comfortable, the literal, the surface-level reality, the version of life that “those who live” in our habitual world call “life.” It is seeing flowers bloom near the sidewalk or smelling the roses and simply thinking “that’s beautiful” without truly apprehending the hidden beauty in the world, but poetry can transform the flowers into something unfamiliar and stunning. We think we see beauty or beautiful things through the veil, but the veil still conceals our true ability to lose ourselves in overwhelming sensations. Thus, Shelley’s sonnet advocates that the reader should lift the veil to experience something beyond our habitual lives. To lift the painted veil is not just to see or smell the pretty flowers or to merely read a poem, but to be stunned, enrapt by the amazing sensations that seize us in the moment, to have our eyes opened to the “chasm, sightless and drear,” and to apprehend the unfamiliar world that the reader cannot see. To lift the veil is to be stunned by nature’s beauty or to read poetry affectively and be lured and absorbed by the poetic language, unable to turn away or think of anything else. To apprehend unknown beauty is to lose control and no longer be a part of the reality that you were once a part. By continuing to live with a veiled lens over our senses, the reader would fail to lift the veil to the beauty in the world and therefore live monotonous, sedated lives.

In “Lift Not the Painted Veil,” the poetic language produces images that cause affective eruption, and those images which overwhelm thought of the viewer or reader is the hidden beauty of the world. If poetic language causes said eruption of emotions, then the author would disappear, the language itself would disappear, the external influences from objects like art or viewers’ opinions would disappear. Poetry allows the reader to see(k) beauty in its purest form, for:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes: its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms (Shelley, *Defense*).

By reading poetry affectively our internal, individual interpretation of images would incite immense and inarticulable sensations. Poetic language exists to unveil beauty to us, and the reader will become a part of affective experience. The poem impedes our reason and reality. The task of seeking meaning, love, or life requires poetic language that can transcend any moment in time. Images in Shelley's sonnet provide a doorway beyond everyday language (painted veil, shapes pictured there, colors idly spread, splendor among shadows, bright blot, gloomy scene) where graphic representation mediates the visual data our brain constructs from the linguistic information Shelley's sonnet provides.

Shelley's sonnet poses a fundamental problem to any of its readers: how can the reader read this poem? To read the sonnet with Shelleyan "apprehension" would mean rejecting its titular advice and taking that other route, one which immerses itself in those apprehended images poetry affectively is to allow the poem to lift the idly colored veil that "mimics all we would believe" and to let the poem's agency overwhelm all our sensations (Shelley 3) In other words, Shelley's sonnet cautions us against something that it then offers

in a form suggested by Gilles Deleuze: images of affect. In his last book, Deleuze argues: “affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them [...] the work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself” (Deleuze 164). Though it may seem paradoxical, Deleuze’s notion of “autonomous affects” suggests a way to address the paradox of Shelley’s sonnet. We can think of the affects within this sonnet as a supreme or divine being that Shelley utilizes to breach our once-shallow comprehension of beauty through descriptors of “the chasm sightless and drear” or the “bright blot” in which the subject strives to become. In other words, affects become otherworldly beings that overwhelm and take over us through art and sensation. These sensations help to feed and preserve the images life that exist within the poem. Art appears before us, both physically and temporally, and art produces sensations that overwhelm us:

Art does not have opinions. Art undoes the triple organization of perceptions, affections, and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects, and blocs of sensations that take the place of language. The writer uses words, but by creating a syntax that makes them pass into sensation that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry, or even sing: this is the style, the ‘tone,’ the language of sensations, [...] The writer twists language, makes it vibrate, seizes hold of it, and rends it in order to wrest the percept from perceptions, the affect from affections, the sensation from opinion (Deleuze 176).

Poets then take words and make them incomprehensible in their ambiguities and extraordinary use in the poem. By doing so, poets therefore transcend the poem from our habitual language to an inexplicable set of sensations in which the reader falls victim. Shelley’s sonnet then makes unfamiliar the words he uses in his lines and renders the

language in order to seize all that the reader once comprehended and lifts the veil to our apprehension of the once-hidden beauty of the world. In other words, the poetic language in “Lift Not the Painted Veil” engulfs the reader in affect/sensation once the reader goes beyond a surface-level understanding of the sonnet. Instead, the poetic language lifts the veil from our eyes transforms into an ungraspable and mystifying combination of sensations and allows the reader to apprehend true beauty in art.

If everyday language—the language of what Shelley calls mere ‘living on’—itself is limiting, then the reader requires the evocation of imagery in poetry that produces a new apprehension the words the reader reads disappear and transform into moments of sublimity that guide us towards beauty. Upon looking at a painting, the subject can feel overwhelmed with indescribable sensations, and perhaps this subliminal moment is a moment of apprehending beauty; however, Shelley’s sonnet is neither a physical painting nor an artistic image that evokes sensation. Instead his poetry utilizes the limitations of language (i.e. an ambiguous visual description of the “unreal shapes [...] pictured there” which conjures in the mind unfamiliarity and abstraction that cannot be physically drawn, only poetic visual language can provoke these indefinable shapes) to recreate those same sensations through poetic imagination. In other words, in “Lift Not the Painted Veil” the description of images can go beyond language by translating any linguistic formulations into visual data in which we, the reader, can feel or experience life. Shelley proposes that the reader does not take the words in the poem at face value, because as images they point to a more expansive apprehension of affects. The reader needs to instead embrace the images to advance our apprehension of beauty. If the premise of the poem is to seek truth or things to approve and love, then perhaps the only way to do so is to be wary of the “unreal shapes” that are

“pictured” as their colors are “idly spread,” and instead become the “bright blot / upon this gloomy scene” of life (Shelley 2, 4, 12-13). In other words, the way to find beauty is to allow the image to overcome or become you. If the reader allows the poem to overcome our being, the reader will have encompassed all that is apprehended in the world through the beauty and rhetoric presented to the reader. In Shelley’s *Defense*, he writes that a

Great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight [...] Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world”

(Shelley, *Defense*)

Like Deleuze, there is a notion that the poet can twist language and seize the reader in sensation that is monumental and makes everlasting the hidden beauty of the world through poetry. Thus poetry undoes all that the reader once understood of affect, percept, and opinions and creates new, almost uncomfortable sensations that overcome us. If this is the case, then the poem not only is beauty, but the channel in which the reader can understand the experiences of those who produced poetry prior to Shelley’s sonnet, for poetic language encompasses, through its unique transcendence of word and image, all that which is beautiful in the world. To read poetry affectively is to lift the veil of life and become one with beauty.

Shelley’s notion of poetic apprehension accounts for the non-adequation of our linguistic structure of the relationship between subject and object. To appease these complex relationships within language, Shelley turns to the poetic image, and although the reader might necessitate the turn to the visual in order to apprehend the world, images and imagery

are only ever invoked in “Lift Not the Painted Veil.” In other words, Shelley did not turn to painting or other visual arts as a way to create evocative imagery. Instead, Shelley evokes a painted veil, colors that are idly spread, unreal shapes, and the bright blot in order to show the reader, through poetic language, an image without the image. The image is prompted in our minds through Shelley’s visual language in the sonnet, but the image never had a physical existence. Due to the infinitude of interpretations the reader may have from reading Shelley’s sonnet, a false precision exists within the poem and appears through the convoluted message Shelley provides for the reader. In other words, the poetic language that Shelley utilizes deposits the reader through the hidden and ambiguous moral that the poetic language buries underneath the complex lines in “Lift Not the Painted Veil.” By beginning the poem with a seemingly clear direction: “Lift not the painted veil which those who live / Call Life,” warning the reader that the veil merely shows “unreal shapes [...] pictured there, / And it but mimic all we would believe / With colors idly spread” and behind the veil “lurk Fear And / Hope” we would easily follow directions and avoid any attempts to lift the veil (Shelley 1-4). The speaker then provides proof that one should not lift the veil for the speaker “knew one who had lifted it--he sought, / [...] things to love, / But found them not” (Shelley 7-9); however, in the final lines, despite telling the reader that the one who lifted the veil failed, the speaker ends the sonnet by turning the one he knew into a martyr: “Through the unheeding many he did move, / A splendor among shadows, a bright blot / Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove / For truth, and like the Preacher found it not” (Shelley 11-14). By ending the poem with positive words, words that glorify the one who lifted the veil, the speaker suddenly shifts the moral at the end of the poem to encourage readers to lift the veil and

become one who breaks free from the “unheeding many” and experience life beyond “this gloomy scene.”

Shelley’s sonnet and the strain of his thinking understands truth not as a state or as the adequation of subject and object or epistemological certainty but truth as an event of poetic apprehension. Thus, by reading “Lift Not the Painted Veil” and allowing for the poetic language to overcome us, truth, through a deep understanding of the poem and an awakening of the obscure beauty, will happen. Although the reader may read poetry or look upon beauty daily, the practice of allowing oneself to open up in order to experience the power of poetic language means to go beyond a shallow, veiled, and/or defensive reading of poetry. In other words, the poem’s abstract language should take over our prior knowledge and then beauty will happen. Benjamin Christensen is also interested in the tie among truth, beauty and poetry and although he writes on Heidegger, his focus on Imagination (of poetry) evoking truth in beauty applies to my own reading of truth and poetry: “truth, as an event, takes place; this taking place opens a space to take place in and the work of art is offered as an example of just that [...] Truth takes place; this demonstrates both the occurring way of truth and the connection of this with dwelling. In addition to its time, truth needs its place, and the Imagination is of the utmost importance in the opening of this place” (Christensen 23). The notion Christensen provides where truth reveals itself when the reader allows an indescribable something to overcome us when the reader reads poetry affectively mirrors my understanding of truth as beauty as an event where the event occurs to us. In other words, in the case of “Lift Not the Painted Veil,” by reading this poem affectively, beauty comes to us and the reader becomes the “splendor among shadows” (Shelley 12). In order to achieve these phenomenal moments, Shelley must go beyond the literal or common and let poetic

language evoke imagination within us to lead us to truth as beauty: “By poetry a world is given a place which is preserved by Dasein; in the space of the poetic, the unsayable takes place. Poetry shows truth as creative act (event) instead of merely as a correspondence between a being and its representation” (Christensen 32). In other words, poetry helps reinforce our presence as beings who lift the veil and witness the world of beauty that exists before us. Once the reader allows beauty to happen to us through apprehending poetry, the reader will go from a veiled life to a life of paralyzing experience that takes over our being; the reader will no longer be a being in that moment of time, the reader will embody beauty, experience, affect, and imagination simultaneously.

Huhn discusses Shelley’s “Lift Not the Painted Veil” with a focus on the “paradoxical treatment of the phenomenon of self-consciousness” writing that although the poem seems to have two subjects (those who don’t lift the veil, and one who lifts the veil and fails), the poem is actually just Shelley creating a separation from himself and an other who failed (Huhn 239). In other words, Huhn’s discussion of dual consciousnesses within an individual highlights a reading that combines the speaker and the observed subject in “Lift Not the Painted Veil,” writing that the speaker separates himself from his other self (the one who failed to find truth) and in doing so the speaker faces his failures while simultaneously detaching himself from his failures. Huhn then reads the negative result of the speaker as a warning for readers to not lift the painted veil because in the journey to find truth, the subject will not only result in failure, but also that the subject will fall into nihilistic tendencies in which the reader needs to avoid. Huhn writes that:

Once the mind unmask[s] [mind-produced shapes and structures] as illusions and projections of itself, man falls victim to nihilism—against which the speaker earnestly

warns the reader [...] Ironically, the nihilistic disillusionment is caused here by an uncompromising quest for emotional, ethical or epistemological absolutes [...] In Shelley's sonnet, the speaker sees that the general reality of life is ultimately constituted by the human mind (Huhn 240-242).

Therefore, in order to avoid nihilism, the reader should instead accept the realities the reader has created for themselves as a type of protection. The veil then transforms into a shield to defend ourselves from existential crises. While I agree with Huhn that the poem is a warning, I argue that lifting the veil is necessary even if it may lead to existential questions or failures to find truth. By the lifting the veil and allowing ourselves to be exposed to the discombobulating affects in the world, the reader can apprehend beauty instead of protecting ourselves from further "failures." The speaker isn't simply warning the reader to not lift the veil, the speaker is luring the reader into experiencing the hidden beauty of the world beyond the veil through the reading of this poem. In other words, despite the first line of the sonnet where the speaker tells the reader to "lift not the painted veil," and cautions the reader from a potential path of failure, the speaker also inadvertently tells the reader that they should lift the veil, for becoming a "splendor among shadows" is a more desirable outcome than simply being a part of the "unheeding many" (Shelley 1, 11-12). I argue that in order to understand Shelley's purpose in this sonnet, the reader should all attempt to lift the veil to experience the emotional qualities associated with poetic language and imagery that Shelley demonstrates in his early sonnet. Although attempts to lift the veil may end in failure or may be disappointingly temporary, the attempts to see(k) beauty should not be unfavorable. In other words, the reader should accept that they may not be able to grasp the eternal feeling of overwhelming sensation from beauty and instead consider the journey in apprehending the

unseen world a worthwhile one if, even for a split-second, the reader will experience the extraordinary and hidden beauty of the world.

By allowing our habitual lives control our actions, the reader falls into a comfort which drowns our ability to experience the feelings that can open our eyes to what Shelley calls splendor in the world; splendors that are always images for Shelley. Our expressions and sensations become stagnant. To avoid living a bleak life and becoming chasms of shallow understandings, Shelley suggests the reader abandons what is familiar and experience the mutability and affective moments that arise when the reader allows themselves to feel or see the beautiful transitions in life (a moment that can arise through poetic language). Shelley proposes the reader lift the painted veil in order to apprehend beauty instead of being blinded by our acceptance of a mundane existence, for “Life and the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel, is an astonishing thing. The mist of familiarity obscures from us the wonder of our being. We are struck with admiration at some of its transient modifications, but it is itself the great miracle” (Shelley *On Life*). Here, Shelley identifies the phenomena of life and how we are wearing a veil (the “mist of familiarity”) that numbs us to even our own apprehension of living in a world filled with marvels and everything that is beautiful in life. In other words, Shelley reinforces the notion that we are blind to the mysterious and amazing thing which is life and the beauties that are shadowed by the unreal shapes we choose to see instead. “Transient modifications,” when applied to a reading of “Lift Not the Painted Veil,” refers to the ability of life, both before and after lifting the veil, to provide such mutable experiences, images, and affects (from unreal shapes to idly spread colors to lost hearts or even bright blots). How is it possible that life can produce such an array of affective moments? Perhaps the warning to not lift the veil

is to avoid potentially falling into the chasm of life's overwhelming and transient experiences that may paralyze us; however, according to Shelley, the reader needs to continue our strive to overcome the familiar and reliance on everyday language in order to be struck by the awe-full beauty life provides for us. On the other hand, Shelley proposes that the reader also avoid forcing ourselves to experience these amazing moments of beauty. In other words, to seek means to not find. To desire seeing the hidden beauty of the world is to be veiled once more; the reader should be willing and hope that poetic language, imagery, and affect happens to us, otherwise we too would not be able to discover the wonders of life.

The reason Shelley suggests the reader lifts the veil is to avoid being one of the unheeding many; one who monotonously goes through life without experiencing the greatness of beauty. We may try to define our lives and give meaning or find different, shallow beauties (such as seeing a picture of a painting on our phones or listening to a recording of Mozart or even reading a poem for its plot) but in naming or labelling these "beauties" instead of experiencing overwhelming unfamiliar things of the world and allowing these hidden beauties to overcome our affects, the reader loses their apprehension life: "Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will, and we employ words to express them. [...] we live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life" (Shelley *On Life*). Shelley advocates that the reader does not use false language of the preacher or live a veiled, monotonous life, but rather seek beauty in the reading of poetry affectively. The lifted veil exposes us to discombobulating and sometimes disturbing emotions that can be paralyzing when seeking a hidden beauty. In the moment of lifting the veil, our desires to label and define our experiences that once prevented us from moving forward in the pursuit for beauty disappears. In "Lift Not the Painted Veil," those individuals who "call" the veil "life" are

limited by language and therefore lose their apprehension of life. In other words, by “calling” the veil “life,” everyday language obstructs our ability to find beauty beyond labels and the naming of abstract concepts. While a word such as “life” may seem to name an external reality, it can actually stand between us and a more complete access to that reality; in this way, everyday language can blind us to apprehending beauty through poetry. Consequently, the veil of everyday language needs to be torn by poetic language for deeper beauties to be perceived. If the reader lifts the veil, the reader may face the bewildering experience of a simultaneous Fear and Hope; however, the reader needs to experience these overwhelming emotions despite their paralyzing and potentially traumatizing effect, for these two affects lie behind the veil and may lead us to seeing the hidden beauties in the world.

Shelley advocates that the reader experience poetic language in order to surpass those “unheeding many,” for unpoetic or everyday language lacks beauty and only in reading and apprehending poetic language can the reader move towards lifting the veil. “Unheeding” here is to pay little to no attention to the slight and beautiful nuances that the reader typically ignores (like that of a cool breeze on a warm day). The narrative Shelley’s sonnet provides demonstrates life as bleak, and truth in beauty (nor things to love and accept) is not something the reader can easily find: “For his lost heart was tender, things to love, / But found them not, alas! nor was there aught / The world contains, the which he could approve” (Shelley 8-10). To read affectively and see(k) truth in beauty is to delve into the ambiguities and complexities that lie within the language we once thought was normal. For example, the veil in this case is a literal veil presumed to be a metaphor for life. The veil then double blinds “those who live.” They are blind to the life that they live, and they are blind to the veil that they call life. In other words, they cannot see the hidden beauty of life even though they

are living adjacent to said beauty because they are blinded by the painted veil—the veil as something they cannot see either because they believe it is reality or because everyday language hinders their ability to see the unfamiliar beauty. But why do they “call” it life? If all language does is label objects, then once the reader labels the object, the object becomes the word. Therefore, the veil becomes life because “those who live” call the veil life (Shelley 1). Language cannot stand alone as, when combined with the image, the image helps to provide the poem with evocations of beauty. Everyday language is insufficient (though the insufficiency of language is not necessarily a surprise). Perhaps the reader simply needs to see the painted veil and experience the image produced by poetic language instead of becoming one who simply “calls” the veil “life.”

The painted veil covers our understanding of life and reality; the veil blinds all our senses in life while simultaneously making nonsense of what we once thought made perfect sense. Once the reader lifts the veil, if the reader can truly lift it at all, the reader is blinded by a new type of overwhelming sensation, for “behind, lurk Fear / And Hope, twin Destinies; who ever weave / Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear” (Shelley 4-5). In other words, once the reader lifts the veil, the reader becomes exposed to new dual sensations that overwhelm us simultaneously: fear and hope. The fear of all the endless possibilities of trying to define the meaning of life (existential crises) and hope that the reader uncovers the hidden beauty of the world and perhaps something to love. The reader requires an intermingling of both fear and hope to experience an internal change when viewing life; both Fear and Hope motivate us to seek beauty in life and to elevate the soul of those who lift the painted veil. Without fear, the reader lacks any personal investment or desire to move forward, and without hope our outlook on a positive outcome appears bleak, and therefore

the reader is not inclined to apprehend unfamiliar beauty. In order to overcome the paralyzing effect of these two affects, we should instead utilize the simultaneous reactions of Fear and Hope that happen to us as we lift the veil, which will motivate us to participate in finding the beauty that lies beyond simply lifting the veil.

There is a sense of paradox or reverse psychology as the poem lures the subject into the poem by describing the desires the reader might have in order to find things to love or approve of in the world. In other words, Shelley essentially writes that the reader should not waste our days trying to apprehend truth—no, that would be pointless as even if the reader tried to lift the painted veil and find truth, the reader would fail—and writes these ideas while winking and hinting to the reader that if they lift the veil, they could become splendors and a Spirit in the end. In the end, Shelley encourages the reader to believe that if the reader truly lifts the veil which obscures our vision of life, the reader would succeed in finding truth in beauty. In Shelley's sonnet, the "one who had lifted it" simply lifted "it" (Shelley 7). The vague word "it" doesn't necessarily point to the veil, but rather can point to anything. In other words, the one who we thought had lifted the veil merely lifted "it," which could be the reason he could not find truth—he had lifted "it," or a false veil. Therefore, if the reader lifts the actual veil and not "it," the reader would eventually find truth in beauty. The use of "it" in this sonnet illustrates the inferiority of language as it can deceive the reader. There is no way to lift the veil if the reader still has language because the reader may just be lifting "it" instead of the veil. Shelley's sonnet illustrates that despite believing what we "call" life (the veil), the veil isn't life. But even if the veil isn't life and is simply an abstract "it," Shelley writes that the reader should continue to seek seeing beyond "it." For despite the fears of lifting a false veil or failing to find truth in beauty, the risk can lead to becoming a "bright

blot” (Shelley 12). In other words, the poem encourages us to lift the veil to become a splendor rather than simply remaining as a shadow of an “unheeding many” and seek beauty instead (Shelley 11). Therefore, the veil, which is not life is also not a veil, is simply a word, and the word blinds us from beauty; however, reading poetic words affectively can still lead us to lifting the veil that dulls the everyday words the reader uses.

In the end, the subject who lifted the veil is considered a “bright blot.” At first read, this phrase or label seems alluring—if the reader lifts the painted veil, the reader will stand out among the unheeding many. However, a “bright blot” is an oxymoronic term. In one sense, the term sounds as though becoming a bright blot would be a positive outcome, especially following the idea of turning into a ‘splendor’ among shadows; however, “blot” is a bit more negative. A “blot” refers to a “spot or stain of ink, mud, or other discoloring matter; disfiguring spot or mark; and “bright” of course refers to “shining, emitting, reflecting, or pervaded by much light” (“Blot,” “Bright,” *OED*). Therefore, in this case, the two terms together are oxymoronic. One way the reader could read the “bright blot” is as an image itself that prevents our apprehension of the beauty in life; a stain which conceals any chance of us seeing beyond the tainted vision. However, if the one who lifted the veil became a “bright blot,” then the “bright blot” is no longer simply an image; with this reading, the “bright blot” would become one who is shining before us, yet simultaneously obscures from us any apprehension of the world. Perhaps then the reader could read the bright blot as a beautifully painted veil where the person who has experienced lifting the veil becomes an ideal of one who still failed to find truth and things to approve but is always shining under the blot. It is as though the person were a Tiffany lamp, where the light (beauty) shines, but is

still veiled or covered, yet continues to emit beautiful, splendid light through the painted veil—the “bright blot” becomes its own form of apprehension that shines through the veil.

Almost 200 years after his death, we continue to find ourselves inscribed in Shelleyan “life.” The desire to obtain an apprehension of beauty limits and blinds our ability to see the true beauty that is hidden in the world. If one could lift the veil through an affective reading of poetry, they would find said beauty. And although they may not be able to share their experience (the individual has to experience truth on their own and cannot apprehend beauty through someone else), their discoveries would illustrate that the reader is not condemned to a gloomy existence. While lifting the veil may not seem feasible, even the attempts to lift the veil can move humanity forward and, even if the result looks like failure, the reader may find themselves closer to finding beauty. In other words, even if the reader does not experience beauty beyond our habitual lives, the reader should continue to try to lift the veil and read poetry affectively. Otherwise, the reader would never experience the overwhelming sensations that take over our being; however, the reader should not, like the Preacher, actively seek truth in beauty. Like Shelley, the reader should allow the sensational beauty to overtake them spontaneously.

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