

# Reading the Story of P. B. Shelley's *Laon and Cythna*

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## Introduction

One of P. B. Shelley's long poems is *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*. This poem was written in 1817 and published in December of that year. In January of 1818, the work was revised and published again under a new title, "The Revolt of Islam; A Poem, In Twelve Cantos". This work describes both the failure and ideal of a revolution modelling the failure of French Revolution. In the narrative, the revolutionist, Laon is brought up with his lover Cythna in his childhood, but forcibly separated by the tyrant and tied to the rock like Prometheus. An old hermit saves him and he becomes engaged with his mission as a revolutionist. Through his struggle for a revolution, he grows into a man although the revolution ultimately fails. Disappointed with the failure of the revolution, he sees Cythna again to love her. Cythna also grows into a woman who plays a female revolutionist's role in trying to liberate women. Laon and Cythna tell their experiences to each other and attain the love of humanity through the process of their struggles and love. In the conclusion of the poem, they sacrifice their life while people will never forget their struggles for the ideal millennium. This work focuses on the importance of love as the best way to resist the tyrant and to recover from the failure of the revolution. In this research note, I will interpret the narrative of Laon's struggle for establishing the ideal millennium as the story of his constructing the domestic peace.

## 1. The Preface of *Laon and Cythna*

*Laon and Cythna* mainly consists of three parts: first, the preface of the author, second the author's dedication poem to Mary, and then the narrative poem about Laon and Cythna. Although these three are apparently separated using "different rhetorical" styles, they share a common theme, motives and metaphors (Gutschera 113). In the following sections, I will look at a consistent pattern in *Laon and Cythna* by examining the metaphors and descriptions in each part. First of all, let us look at the preface in which Shelley explains about the theme of his work. In the preface, Shelley mentions that the French Revolution is a model for the narrative of Laon and Cythna, when he points out both the good and the bad points of the Revolution.

The French Revolution may be considered as one of those manifestations of a general state of feeling among civilized mankind, produced by a defect of correspondence between the knowledge existing in society and the improvement, or gradual abolition of political institutions. [. . .] The sympathies connected with that event extended to every bosom. The most generous and amiable natures were those which participated the most extensively in these sympathies. But such a degree of unmingled good was expected, as it was impossible to realize. If the Revolution had been in every respect prosperous, then misrule and superstition would lose half their claims to our abhorrence, as fetters which the captive can unlock with the slightest motion of his fingers, and which do not eat with poisonous rust into the soul. The revulsion occasioned by the atrocities of the demagogues, and the re-establishment of successive tyrannies in France was terrible, and felt in the remotest corner of the civilized world. (Preface 114-15)

According to Shelley, citizens complained about their contemporary social and political institutions to raise the French Revolution. The good point is that citizens "extensively" developed sympathies for this revolution (Preface

115). Yet, their ideal was not realized because “the demagogues” and “successive tyrannies” brought about “misrule and superstition” which caused Shelley’s and his contemporaries’ “abhorrence” (Preface 115). Thus, many writers have felt disappointed with the failure of the French Revolution and have not tried to seek any solution and merely emphasize their gloomy despair.

Thus, many of the most ardent and render-hearted of the worshippers of public good, have been morally ruined by what a partial glimpse of the events they deplored, appeared to shew as the melancholy desolation of all their cherished hopes. Hence gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair. This influence has tainted the literature of the age with the hopelessness of the minds from which it flows. (Preface 115)

In spite of the hopeless tendency of his day, Shelley is not completely overwhelmed by the despair but optimistically thinks that people gradually recover from it.

The panic which, like an epidemic transport, seized upon all classes of men during the excesses consequent upon the French Revolution, is gradually giving place to sanity. It has ceased to be believed, that whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a hopeless inheritance of ignorance and misery, because a nation of men who had been dupes and slaves for centuries, were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom and tranquility of freemen so soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened. (Preface 114)

Believing that people begin to be free from the despair and become wiser, Shelley decides to write the narrative of Laon and Cythna to encourage them to gain hope. This is Shelley’s aim in writing the work.

Our works of fiction and poetry have been overshadowed by the same infectious gloom. But mankind appear to me to be emerging from their trance. I am aware, methinks, of a slow, gradual, silent change. In that belief I have composed the following Poem. (Preface 116)

Shelley analyzes how people begin to recover from the “infectious” despair caused by the failure of the French Revolution (Preface 116).

There is a reflux in the tide of human things which bears the shipwrecked hopes of men into a secure haven, after the storms are past. Methinks, those who now live have survived an age of despair. (Preface 114)

Shelley compares the “panic” after the French Revolution to the storms in the sea and people’s hope to the wrecked ship (Preface 114). Yet, this ship never sinks but manages to reach the “secure” port because of a change of the current in the sea (Preface 114). In other words, the tendency of the world changes and people recover from the “panic” of their despair and can regain the “sanity” of the hope (Preface 114). Considering the context of the passage, “a reflux in the tide of human things” means the tendency of the day in which people begin to awake from their stagnant despair (Preface 114). At the same time, Shelley’s writing is also “a reflux in the tide” since he writes the narrative of *Laon and Cythna* to encourage people to recover the hope (Preface 114). Now, where is the “secure” port in the narrative of *Laon and Cythna* (Preface 114)? We can speculate that the secure port is a heavenly temple where *Laon and Cythna* takes an aerial boat guided by an angel at the end of the narrative.

In the conclusion of the preface, Shelley emphasizes the importance of love by mentioning that “Love is celebrated every where as the sole law which should govern the moral world” (Preface 120). Shelley, in the preface before the revision, explains about the reason to describe the incestuous love between *Laon and Cythna*.

In the personal conduct of my Hero and Heroine, there is one circumstance which was intended to startle the reader from the trance of ordinary life. It was my object to break through the crust of those outworn opinions on which established institutions depend. I have appealed therefore to the most universal of all feelings, and have endeavoured to strengthen the moral sense, by forbidding it to waste its energies in seeking to avoid actions which are only crimes of convention. (Preface 120)

While Shelley is conscious that Laon and Cythna breaks the taboo of incest, he dares to use the motif to awake people from their convention and to make them recognize love and sympathy. Based on this logic, Shelley summarizes the story of Laon and Cythna.

It [The Poem] is a succession of pictures illustrating the growth and progress of individual mind aspiring after excellence, and devoted to the love of mankind; its influence in refining and making pure the most daring and uncommon impulses of the imagination, the understanding, and the senses; its impatience at “all the oppressions which are done under the sun;” its tendency to awaken public hope and to enlighten and improve mankind; (Preface 113)

The main theme of the narrative is that Laon and Cythna grow up both physically and mentally, learning “resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long believing courage” (Preface 115). Shelley considers that since these mental elements were “overleapt” during the French Revolution, the result of the revolution was not prosperous (Preface 115). Shelley anticipates readers to learn the process in which Laon and Cythna learn the love and sympathy.

## 2. A Dedication Poem to Mary

While the narrator of the preface is a prose in which Shelley makes a

public announcement about his poem, the dedication poem is a poem expressing Shelley's private emotions for his wife, Mary. These two works differ from each other in styles and rhetoric, but we can find similarity of the mental states between the narrator of the preface and the speaker of the dedication poem. The speaker of the poem also suffers from despair and manages to nourish hope of fighting to improve the world. In the opening stanza of the poem, the speaker returns to his home.

So now my summer-task is ended, Mary,  
And I return to thee, mine own heart's home;  
As to his Queen some victor Knight of Faëry,  
Earning bright spoils for her inchated dome; ("To Mary" 1.1-4)

Here, the speaker is a glorious fighter who has gained "bright spoils" for his wife, Mary ("To Mary" 1.4). It is true that as he swears "I will be wise" ("To Mary" 4.31), he grows into a man who is "calm" and keeps his tears under control ("To Mary" 4.36). In this context, he is a successful man who knows no despair or loneliness. Yet, the speaker has a feeling of frustration because he was betrayed by his friend and knows "A sense of loneliness," experiencing "black despair" ("To Mary" 5.45, 6.48).

Alas, that love should be a blight and snare  
To those who seek all sympathies in one! –  
Such once I sought in vain; then black despair,  
The shadow of a starless night, was thrown  
Over the world in which I moved alone: –  
Yet never found I one not false to me,  
Hard hearts, and cold, like weights of icy stone  
Which crushed and withered mine, that could not be  
Aught but a lifeless clog, until revived by thee. ("To Mary" 6.46-54)

The despair never completely overwhelmed the speaker who is "revived by" Mary ("To Mary" 6.54). Thanks to Mary's love, the speaker hopes to be con-

fidant about his writing, but his heart is still oscillating between the despair (the mental death) and the hope (the life seeking for love and sympathy).

Is it, that now my inexperienced fingers  
But strike the prelude of a loftier strain?  
Or, must the lyre on which my spirit lingers  
Soon pause in silence, ne'er to sound again,  
Tho' it might shake the Anarch Custom's reign,  
And charm the minds of men to Truth's own sway  
Holier than was Amphion's? I would fain  
Reply in hope – but I am worn away,  
And Death and Love are contending for their prey. (“To Mary” 10.82-90)

For the speaker, Mary plays an important role in reviving his “wintry heart” (“To Mary” 7.55). In this description, we can find the pattern of death and re-birth which is compared to the seasonal shift from winter to spring.

Thou Friend, whose presence on my wintry heart  
Fell, like bright Spring upon some herbless plain;  
How beautiful and calm and free thou wert  
In thy young wisdom, when the mortal chain  
Of Custom thou didst burst and rend in twain,  
And walked as free as light the clouds among,  
Which many an envious slave then breathed in vain  
From his dim dungeon, and my spirit sprung  
To meet thee from the woes which had begirt it long. (“To Mary” 7.55-63)

Mary's love is “A lamp of vestal fire” which restores the speaker's hope to life and which can “subdue” his fears (“To Mary” 11.99, 97). Here, Mary is deified as a prophet of love whose radiance is inherited from her “glorious parents”, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (“To Mary” 12.101).

They say that thou wert lovely from thy birth,  
Of glorious parents, thou aspiring Child.  
I wonder not – for One then left this earth  
Whose life was like a setting planet mild,  
Which clothed thee in the radiance undefiled  
Of its departing glory; still her fame  
Shines on thee, thro' the tempests dark and wild  
Which shake these latter days; and thou canst claim  
The shelter, from thy Sire, of immortal name. ("To Mary" 12.100-108)

The speaker anticipates that Mary is a good friend who cooperates with him to improve the world. Mary's literary glory inherited from her parents is not the only reason the speaker regards her as a "Sweet Friend" ("To Mary" 14.122). Her domestic love is an inspiration for the speaker's poem which enlightens the world.

And from thy side two gentle babes are born  
To fill our home with smiles, and thus are we  
Most fortunate beneath life's beaming morn;  
And these delights, and thou, have been to me  
The parents of the Song I consecrate to thee. ("To Mary" 9.77-81)

Here, Shelley implies that the domestic love leads people to love of humanity. In fact, he uses a similar metaphor to describe the power of love. Love of humanity is immortal and inherited as "Truth's deathless voice" to overwhelm "the pale oppressors" ("To Mary" 14.118, 13.114).

One voice came forth from many a mighty spirit,  
Which was the echo of three thousand years;  
And the tumultuous world stood mute to hear it,  
As some lone man who in a desert hears  
The music of his home: – unwonted fears  
Fell on the pale oppressors of our race ("To Mary" 13.109-114)



Here, the speaker fighting despair is compared to “some lone man who in a desert” (“To Mary” 13.112). When he holds the domestic love, appreciating “The music of his home”, he realizes love of humanity to win the oppressors (“To Mary” 13.113).

In this way, the narrator of the preface and the speaker of the dedication poem confirms the love to overcome their failure and despair. We can find the pattern of confirming the love and returning home in the narrative of Laon and Cythna.

### 3. The Narrative of Laon and Cythna

In Canto 2 of the narrative poem, Shelley described the childhood of Laon in which he nurses the strong ties with his sister-lover Cythna.<sup>1</sup> As is often described in Romantic works, the incestuous love between siblings is formed in their childhood and they shares the “memories” of the happy childhood (Richardson 739). Based on their shared memory, Laon and Cythna have stronger ties and sympathy when they grow up and see each other again. At the end of Canto 2, Laon and Cythna begin to be conscious of their own missions and anticipate that the lovers will part before long. As Cythna says that her role is to make people have “Domestic peace”, so she leads Laon to domestic peace later (2.37.330). At the same time, Cythna anticipates that they will go their separate ways to perform their own missions but that they will meet again.

“We part to meet again – but yon blue waste,  
Yon desert wide and deep holds no recess,  
Within whose happy silence, thus embraced  
We might survive all ills in one caress:  
[.....]  
[...] we meet again  
Within the minds of men, whose lips shall bless  
Our memory, and whose hopes its light retain  
When these dissevered bones are trodden in the plain.” (2.48.424-27, 429-

32)

Feeling sad about their coming destiny, Laon and Cythna go home. The action of going home is significant. First, their home means the “refuge” in which they can endure their mental difficulty and prepare for their future difficulties (2.49.441). Second, we can anticipate they will return to their mental home when they see each other again after their separation.

I could not speak, tho' she had ceased, for now  
The fountains of her feeling, swift and deep,  
Seemed to suspend the tumult of their flow;  
So we arose, and by the star-light steep  
Went homeward – neither did we speak nor weep,  
But pale, were clam with passion – thus subdued  
Like evening shades that o'er the mountains creep,  
We moved towards our home; where, in this mood,  
Each from the other sought refuge in solitude. (2.49.433-41)

As Cythna anticipates their separation, Laon and Cythna are forcibly separated in Canto 3. Cythna is kidnapped by the tyrant and Laon is assaulted and tied to the rock by the followers of the tyrant. Now, what motif is used when Laon and Cythna meet again? After their separation, Laon and Cythna survive to perform their missions without knowing of each other. Laon rouses a revolution which is successful temporarily. Yet, in Canto 6, the revolution fails because an epidemic and famine break out. During the disturbances of war, Laon sees Cythna again to hear Cythna's pants which sound like sweet watery music.

[...] the Tartar horse  
Paused, and I saw the shape its might which swayed,  
And heard her musical pants, like the sweet source  
Of waters in the desert, as she said,  
“Mount with me, Laon, now” – I rapidly obeyed. (6.20.176-80)

It is important that Shelley compares Cythna's pants to the music of the watery source in a desert. In the dedication poem, for the weary speaker, humanity for love is also like "The music of his home" which a lonely traveller hears "in a desert" ("To Mary" 13.113, 112). Laon is also weary from the failure of the revolution, but he can find love for humanity when he sees Cythna again.

The metaphor of the watery music is also associated with the marriage of Laon and Cythna.

Few were the living hearts which could unite  
Like ours, or celebrate a bridal night  
With such close sympathies, for to each other  
Had high and solemn hopes, the gentle might  
Of earliest love, and all the thoughts which smother  
Cold Evil's power, now liked a sister and brother. (6.39.346-51)

Laon and Cythna realize their "earliest love" through which they recover the paradise in their childhood (6.39.350). For the embrace of Laon and Cythna reminds us of Laon's clasp of Cythna's hand in their childhood. Laon's embrace of Cythna is compared to the "living tree" which clasps "its own kindred leaves" (6.40.358, 360). When they are young, Laon feels Cythna's clasping hand "twined" his hand like an ivy (3.26.227). When Laon and Cythna see each other again, they metaphorically return to their childhood home in which "love had nursed" them (6.41.364)

And such is Nature's modesty, that those  
Who grow together cannot choose but love,  
If faith or custom do not interpose,  
Or common slavery mar what else might move  
All gentlest thoughts; as in the sacred grove  
Which shades the springs of Æthiopian Nile,  
That living tree, which, if arrowy dove  
Strike with her shadow, shrinks in fear awhile,

But its own kindred leaves clasps while the sun-beams smile;

And clings to them, when darkness may dis sever  
The close caresses of all duller plants  
Which bloom on the wide earth – thus we forever  
Were linked, for love had nurst us in the haunts  
Where knowledge, from its secret source inchants  
Young hearts with the fresh music of its springing,  
Ere yet its gathered flood feeds human wants,  
As the great Nile feeds Egypt; ever flinging  
Light on the woven boughs which o'er its waves are swinging. (6.40.352-41.369)

In the scene which describes the love of Laon and Cythna, they satisfy their love like the Nile's fertilizing Egypt. The motif of the mother's feeding or nursing her child shows that Laon and Cythna are mentally reborn to recover from the failure of the revolution. In their mental growth process, the same motif can be seen. For example, when Laon is tied to the rock, an old hermit saves him. Interestingly, the hermit plays a role of Laon's father, but he is compared to "some sick mother" who "seems / To hang in hope over a dying child" (3.33.295, 295-96). When Laon recovers from his mental and physical damage by the hermit's help, Laon is reborn and grows up by the power of a mother's love. Cythna has a similar experience when she is raped by the tyrant and gives a birth to a child. Cythna is reborn to a mother, when she and her child are described as a child of the earth.

"Ere night, methought, her [Cythna's child's] waning eyes were grown  
Weary with joy, and tired with our delight,  
We [Cythna and her child], on the earth, like sister twins lay down  
On one fair mother's bosom: [...] (7.22.190-93)

In these contexts, Laon and Cythna are reborn into a couple whose ties are strengthen when they see each other again and love each other.

On the other hand, the reunion of Laon and Cythna is not the final scene of the narrative. Thus, their love is not enough for them to complete love of humanity. When Cythna is trapped in the cave and saved by the sailors, she appeals to them, saying “Ye cannot rest upon the dreary seal – / Haste, haste to the warm home of happier destiny!” (8.1.8-9). Her statement emphasizes the importance of how the domestic peace is formed not only by a couple but also their children.

“What dream ye? Your own hands have built an home,  
Even for yourselves on a beloved shore:  
For some, fond eyes are pining till they come,  
How they will greet him when his toils are o’er,  
And laughing babes rush from the well-known door! (8.4.28-32)

In this context, Laon and Cythna also need the child to construct their true domestic love. In this work, Laon is not biologically the father of Cythna’s child because she is born of the tyrant’s rape. Yet, through the narrative, Laon becomes the mental father of the child. In Canto 5, Laon meets Cythna’s child in the tyrant’s palace for the first time. Laon feels a strange familiarity with the child and thinks that she resembles Cythna.

The little child stood up when we came nigh;  
[.....]  
She stood beside him [the King] like a rainbow braided  
Within some storm, when scarce its shadows vast  
From the blue paths of the swift sun have faded;  
A sweet and solemn smile, like Cythna’s, cast  
One moment’s light, which made my heart beat fast,  
O’er that child’s parted lips – a gleam of bliss,  
A shade of vanished days, – as the tears past  
Which wrapt it, even as with a father’s kiss  
I pressed those softest eyes in trembling tenderness. (5.23.199, 24.208-216)

These lines imply that Laon becomes the father of the child later because his kiss on the child is “as with a father’s kiss” (5.24.215). At the end of the story, Laon and Cythna are arrested by the tyrant and burn to death at the stake. At the same time, the child is also killed by the tyrant because she pleads for their lives. After death, they are all restored and go to the temple in heaven by aerial ship. The child is reborn as the angel who guides Laon and Cythna.

Then Cythna turned to me, and from her eyes  
Which swam with unshed tears, a look more sweet  
Than happy love, a wild and glad surprise,  
Glanced as she spake; “Ay, this is Paradise  
And not a dream, and we are all united!  
Lo, that is mine own child, who in the guise  
Of madness came, like day to one benighted  
In lonesome woods: my heart is now too well required!” (12.22.191-98)

As Cythna declares “we are all united!” in the aerial boat, so the child joins Laon and Cythna and these three realizes the true domestic love (12.22.195). Laon is admitted as the father of the child by not only Cythna but also the child.

Then the bright child, the plumed Seraph came,  
And fixed its blue and beaming eyes on mine,  
As said, “I was disturbed by tremulous shame  
When once we met, yet knew that I was thine  
From the same hour in which thy lips divine  
Kindled a clinging dream within my brain,  
Which ever waked when I might sleep, to twine  
Thine image with *her* memory dear – again  
We meet; exempted now from mortal fear or pain. (12.24.208-216)

The aerial boat finally reaches the temple in heaven which means “a secure haven” (Preface 114). There, Laon and Cythna overcome the storm of the

revolution and love each other to form the domestic love. This is the story of Laon and Cythna who learn “resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long believing courage” (Preface 115).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the original draft, Shelley describes Laon and Cythna are as siblings, but later revises it. See *Laon and Cythna* 2.21.181 and 6.39.351. See also 159n. and 231n.

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