

# The danger of deranged appetites: when hunger hijacks existence



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“ And he has bought / With his sweet voice and eyes, from savage men, / His rest and food.” - Percy Shelley’s Alastor

In Shelley’s Alastor, the Poet is initially presented as an “ early youth” relying upon his “ sweet” words to obtain his nourishment. In an effort to satisfy his appetite for Nature’s “ deep mysteries,” the Poet journeys through a vast wilderness and heartily indulges in the numerous beautiful scenes Nature has to offer. The Poet also partakes in his “ bloodless food,” revealing a vegetarian diet that adds to his harmonious relationship with Nature (129). Guided by a healthy appetite for Nature’s innermost secrets, the Poet is able to be adequately nourished. However, this once normal sense of hunger becomes permanently deranged after a fascinating dream awakens in him an insatiable hunger for the impossible- a supernatural ideal. This dangerous corruption of hunger is what renders the Poet’s aesthetic abilities useless and draws out his final, passive surrender as an artist. Throughout Alastor, the Poet’s hunger operates deceptively to drain his energy, manipulating his life-long journey towards the hopeless pursuit of intellectual beauty until the final surrender to death. The first misdeeds of the Poet’s hunger are seen immediately after the visionary maiden is perceived- after his fleeting but euphoric touch with the supernatural, the Poet cannot possibly find an adequate replacement to match the joy experienced in the dream world. In yearning for “ sweet human love,” the Poet eagerly contemplates suicide in order to achieve union with this ideal- “ Does the dark gate of death conduct to thy mysterious paradise, O Sleep?” (211-213). After a few more passages detailing his sullen existence, the Poet then flirts with death a second time, crying out, “ Vision and Love! I have beheld the path of thy departure. Sleep and death shall not divide us long!” (366-368). The constant state of misery

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experienced due to a never-ending dissatisfaction with the material world expedites the Poet's acceptance of death as a favorable consequence- this reveals hunger as a drive that's become seriously deranged in the Poet. Hunger, in the biological sense, is a basic survival mechanism. In this regard, hunger is an arousing force- it signals the body to seek out the source of nourishment essential for the organism's survival. Yet the natural sense of hunger in the Poet changes for the worse- the Poet's hunger becomes enormously defective, leading him not to a period of feeding that induces satiation, but rather towards an endless cycle of dissatisfaction. This hunger, now dysfunctional, does not serve him advantageously as it should. Instead of acting as the arousing force of survival, hunger in Alastor's Poet acts as a malignant, degenerative force- his hungry gaze tricks him into viewing death as a viable solution for, " He sought in Nature's dearest haunt, some bank, her cradle, and his sepulcher." (429-430). Hunger has transformed into quite the treacherous force indeed. The result of his insatiable appetite for " sweet human love" is that the Poet becomes dissatisfied with the once beloved images of Nature; hunger squanders his potential as an artist, again acting to the detriment of the Poet. Willing to abandon everything in his unrealistic pursuit of ideal beauty, the Poet is in effect sacrificing his lifeblood- the ability to perceive and appreciate Nature's aesthetics. After witnessing the flight of a swan, the poet reflects, " And what am I that I should linger here, / With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes, / Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned / To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers / In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven / That echoes not my thoughts?" (286-290). The Poet laments his existence in the earthly realm, which reflects not the irresistible visions of his dreams. Doomed to lifelong

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dissatisfaction with the physical beauty presented to him, the poet cannot help but feel dysfunctional as an artist. Whereas Shelley once describes early on in the poem how Nature's "fountains of divine philosophy fled not his thirsting lips," the Poet after the significant overturning of hunger, cannot seem to be satisfied on the same source of sustenance (71). Whereas once "every sight and sound from the vast earth and ambient air, sent to his heart its choicest impulses," now nothing in the natural world can suffice (68-70). When he stumbles upon a bed of flowers, he has a sudden compulsion to "deck with their bright hues his withered hair," (413-414). But once again, under the intense scrutiny of a newfound appetite, "on his heart its solitude returned, and he forbore," - what was once satisfactory is now unworthy, and he resists the aesthetic value of the "yellow flowers," (414-415). How can the artist (who once delighted in Nature so greatly) be able to turn down the sunny richness embodied in Shelley's yellow flowers? The youthful, vibrant energy of the yellow flowers provides a striking counterpoint to the Poet's withered state- the color is one of joy, stimulating the creative energies in an individual. All rationality and artistic drive is lost when possessed by a deranged hunger. The fact that the Poet is able to desist and "forbear" from the simple beauty set before him speaks to the iron-clad grip hunger has on his desires (414). All previous joyous experiences fall short- the Poet's natural taste for aesthetic cues, once touched by dreams, becomes hopelessly deranged. Instead of prompting the Poet to assimilate the bounty of beautiful images found in his natural environment, the hunger for a beauty matching the ethereal forms in his dreams forces him to reject the more familiar beauties placed in front of him. Without his art to pursue and take joy in, the Poet no longer finds his diet sustainable. With his life's

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primary source of aesthetic joy ruined, the Poet sinks further into solitude which enables hunger to effectively hijack his being into passivity and have him relinquish control over his life. With his earlier acknowledgement of death as the one solution to his burning desire for beauty, the Poet could have easily ended his aimless, miserable wandering. But the Poet, "obedient to the light that shone within his soul," is convinced, or rather deceived, by his malevolent hunger to continue his fatal pursuit until he is sufficiently weakened (493-494). Just as a parasite must keep its host alive to sustain itself, the Poet's hunger cannot immediately kill him off either. Hunger feeds off the Poet, "like restless serpents, clothed / In rainbow and in fire, these parasites," (438-439). The Poet is lured in by the light; here, hunger is deceptively masquerading as the positive, shining "light" within his soul, when it is anything but. "At night the passion came," and hunger is also described as "Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream, which shook him from his rest, and led him forth / Into the darkness," bestowing an almost-Satanic quality to the force of hunger present in the Poet (224-227).

Moreover, the specific word choice "led" emphasizes that this walk into darkness (a metaphor foreshadowing death) is not an active choice made by the Poet- there is no free will, demonstrating the passivity of the Poet. Death is always the end destination it seems, as hunger seizes control of his system and ceases to let go- "the wanderer's footsteps fell, he knew that death was on him. Yet a little, ere it fled, did he resign his high and holy soul to images of the majestic past, that paused within his passive being now," (626-630). The extent to which his hunger has beguiled him is demonstrated

by the fact that the Poet does not perceive death as unpleasant. Even as the Poet lies dying, "no mortal pain or fear marred his repose," and the Poet <https://assignbuster.com/the-danger-of-deranged-appetites-when-hunger-hijacks-existence/>

enters a state of calm and tranquility, envisioning the heaven he will escape to (639-640). Alastor's solitary Poet, although taking in bloodless food, wasted away through the inadequate consumption of his natural world, as he was fatally misled by a dysfunctional sense of hunger. Being unlike ordinary men (visionary artists are far and few between), it seems natural that he is pushed to isolation at the outset of the poem. Social inclusion tends to have a grounding effect on an individual, for civilization is a rational force. But since the Poet lives in solitude, he is more likely to follow the extreme, imaginative pursuits originating from a passion for his art; he lives without the voice of others to dissuade him from pursuing "Nature's most secret steps." In this context, insatiable hunger for such an ideal human form seems fitting punishment for the man unwilling to seek out society. But was supernatural enlightenment and the consequent lifelong misery chasing after unattainable forms effective punishment for an ego stemming perhaps from loneliness? If the Poet is able to die in peace, is a life of lonely misery and aimless wandering not a life well-lived? And did the Poet not achieve the highest possible form of mortal art? Because while Shelley titled the poem, "Alastor" (Greek for "avenging demons" or "evil genius,") to describe the ills of living in solitude, it seems the Poet, while alone, achieves a truly noble task- dying without regret, pain or fear (Bean, 60). Although it is implied that the Poet is unremembered by his brethren, surely his life's artistry is immortalized through the existence of this poem alone. Works Cited Bean, John C., "The Poet Borne Darkly: The Dream-Voyage Allegory in Shelley's Alastor" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 23, (1974), pp. 60-76. Keats-Shelley Association of America, Inc. 1974. 12 March 2012