Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Sensitive Plant"

PART I.

A Sensitive Plant in a garden grew, And the young winds fed it with silver dew, And it opened its fan-like leaves to the light. And closed them beneath the kisses of Night.

And the Spring arose on the garden fair, Like the Spirit of Love felt everywhere; And each flower and herb on Earth's dark breast

Rose from the dreams of its wintry rest.

But none ever trembled and panted with bliss In the garden, the field, or the wilderness, Like a doe in the noontide with love's sweet want.

As the companionless Sensitive Plant.

The snowdrop, and then the violet,
Arose from the ground with warm rain wet,
And their breath was mixed with fresh odour,
sent

From the turf, like the voice and the instrument.

Then the pied wind-flowers and the tulip tall, And narcissi, the fairest among them all, Who gaze on their eyes in the stream's recess, Till they die of their own dear loveliness;

And the Naiad-like lily of the vale, Whom youth makes so fair and passion so pale That the light of its tremulous bells is seen Through their pavilions of tender green;

And the hyacinth purple, and white, and blue, Which flung from its bells a sweet peal anew Of music so delicate, soft, and intense, It was felt like an odour within the sense;

And the rose like a nymph to the bath addressed,

Which unveiled the depth of her glowing breast,

Till, fold after fold, to the fainting air The soul of her beauty and love lay bare:

And the wand-like lily, which lifted up, As a Maenad, its moonlight-coloured cup, Till the fiery star, which is its eye, Gazed through clear dew on the tender sky; And the jessamine faint, and the sweet tuberose.

The sweetest flower for scent that blows; And all rare blossoms from every clime Grew in that garden in perfect prime.

And on the stream whose inconstant bosom Was pranked, under boughs of embowering blossom.

With golden and green light, slanting through Their heaven of many a tangled hue,

Broad water-lilies lay tremulously, And starry river-buds glimmered by, And around them the soft stream did glide and dance

With a motion of sweet sound and radiance.

And the sinuous paths of lawn and of moss, Which led through the garden along and across,

Some open at once to the sun and the breeze, Some lost among bowers of blossoming trees,

Were all paved with daisies and delicate bells As fair as the fabulous asphodels, And flow'rets which, drooping as day drooped too.

Fell into pavilions, white, purple, and blue, To roof the glow-worm from the evening dew.

And from this undefiled Paradise The flowers (as an infant's awakening eyes Smile on its mother, whose singing sweet Can first lull, and at last must awaken it),

When Heaven's blithe winds had unfolded them.

As mine-lamps enkindle a hidden gem, Shone smiling to Heaven, and every one Shared joy in the light of the gentle sun;

For each one was interpenetrated
With the light and the odour its neighbour shed.

Like young lovers whom youth and love make dear

Wrapped and filled by their mutual atmosphere.

But the Sensitive Plant which could give small fruit

Of the love which it felt from the leaf to the root.

Received more than all, it loved more than ever,

Where none wanted but it, could belong to the giver,--

For the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower; Radiance and odour are not its dower; It loves, even like Love, its deep heart is full, It desires what it has not, the Beautiful!

The light winds which from unsustaining wings

Shed the music of many murmurings; The beams which dart from many a star Of the flowers whose hues they bear afar;

The plumed insects swift and free, Like golden boats on a sunny sea, Laden with light and odour, which pass Over the gleam of the living grass;

The unseen clouds of the dew, which lie Like fire in the flowers till the sun rides high, Then wander like spirits among the spheres, Each cloud faint with the fragrance it bears;

The quivering vapours of dim noontide, Which like a sea o'er the warm earth glide, In which every sound, and odour, and beam, Move, as reeds in a single stream;

Each and all like ministering angels were For the Sensitive Plant sweet joy to bear, Whilst the lagging hours of the day went by Like windless clouds o'er a tender sky.

And when evening descended from Heaven above,

And the Earth was all rest, and the air was all love.

And delight, though less bright, was far more deep,

And the day's veil fell from the world of sleep,

And the beasts, and the birds, and the insects were drowned

In an ocean of dreams without a sound; Whose waves never mark, though they ever impress

The light sand which paves it, consciousness;

(Only overhead the sweet nightingale Ever sang more sweet as the day might fail, And snatches of its Elysian chant Were mixed with the dreams of the Sensitive Plant);--

The Sensitive Plant was the earliest Upgathered into the bosom of rest; A sweet child weary of its delight, The feeblest and yet the favourite, Cradled within the embrace of Night.

PART II.

There was a Power in this sweet place, An Eve in this Eden; a ruling Grace Which to the flowers, did they waken or dream

Was as God is to the starry scheme.

A Lady, the wonder of her kind, Whose form was upborne by a lovely mind Which, dilating, had moulded her mien and motion

Like a sea-flower unfolded beneath the ocean,

Tended the garden from morn to even: And the meteors of that sublunar Heaven, Like the lamps of the air when Night walks forth,

Laughed round her footsteps up from the Earth!

She had no companion of mortal race,
But her tremulous breath and her flushing face
Told, whilst the morn kissed the sleep from
her eyes,

That her dreams were less slumber than Paradise:

As if some bright Spirit for her sweet sake Had deserted Heaven while the stars were awake,

As if yet around her he lingering were,
Though the veil of daylight concealed him
from her.

Her step seemed to pity the grass it pressed; You might hear by the heaving of her breast, That the coming and going of the wind Brought pleasure there and left passion behind. And wherever her aery footstep trod, Her trailing hair from the grassy sod Erased its light vestige, with shadowy sweep, Like a sunny storm o'er the dark green deep.

I doubt not the flowers of that garden sweet Rejoiced in the sound of her gentle feet; I doubt not they felt the spirit that came From her glowing fingers through all their frame.

She sprinkled bright water from the stream On those that were faint with the sunny beam; And out of the cups of the heavy flowers She emptied the rain of the thunder-showers.

She lifted their heads with her tender hands, And sustained them with rods and osier-bands; If the flowers had been her own infants, she Could never have nursed them more tenderly.

And all killing insects and gnawing worms, And things of obscene and unlovely forms, She bore, in a basket of Indian woof, Into the rough woods far aloof,--

In a basket, of grasses and wild-flowers full, The freshest her gentle hands could pull For the poor banished insects, whose intent, Although they did ill, was innocent.

But the bee and the beamlike ephemeris Whose path is the lightning's, and soft moths that kiss

The sweet lips of the flowers, and harm not, did she

Make her attendant angels be.

And many an antenatal tomb, Where butterflies dream of the life to come, She left clinging round the smooth and dark Edge of the odorous cedar bark.

This fairest creature from earliest Spring
Thus moved through the garden ministering
Mi the sweet season of Summertide,
And ere the first leaf looked brown--she died!

PART III.

Three days the flowers of the garden fair, Like stars when the moon is awakened, were, Or the waves of Baiae, ere luminous She floats up through the smoke of Vesuvius.

And on the fourth, the Sensitive Plant Felt the sound of the funeral chant, And the steps of the bearers, heavy and slow, And the sobs of the mourners, deep and low;

The weary sound and the heavy breath, And the silent motions of passing death, And the smell, cold, oppressive, and dank, Sent through the pores of the coffin-plank;

The dark grass, and the flowers among the grass,

Were bright with tears as the crowd did pass; From their sighs the wind caught a mournful

And sate in the pines, and gave groan for groan.

The garden, once fair, became cold and foul, Like the corpse of her who had been its soul, Which at first was lovely as if in sleep, Then slowly changed, till it grew a heap To make men tremble who never weep.

Swift Summer into the Autumn flowed, And frost in the mist of the morning rode, Though the noonday sun looked clear and bright,

Mocking the spoil of the secret night.

The rose-leaves, like flakes of crimson snow, Paved the turf and the moss below. The lilies were drooping, and white, and wan, Like the head and the skin of a dying man.

And Indian plants, of scent and hue
The sweetest that ever were fed on dew,
Leaf by leaf, day after day,
Were massed into the common clay.

And the leaves, brown, yellow, and gray, and red,

And white with the whiteness of what is dead, Like troops of ghosts on the dry wind passed; Their whistling noise made the birds aghast.

And the gusty winds waked the winged seeds, Out of their birthplace of ugly weeds, Till they clung round many a sweet flower's stem.

Which rotted into the earth with them.

The water-blooms under the rivulet Fell from the stalks on which they were set; And the eddies drove them here and there, As the winds did those of the upper air.

Then the rain came down, and the broken stalks

Were bent and tangled across the walks; And the leafless network of parasite bowers Massed into ruin; and all sweet flowers.

Between the time of the wind and the snow All loathliest weeds began to grow, Whose coarse leaves were splashed with many a speck,

Like the water-snake's belly and the toad's back.

And thistles, and nettles, and darnels rank, And the dock, and henbane, and hemlock dank,

Stretched out its long and hollow shank, And stifled the air till the dead wind stank.

And plants, at whose names the verse feels loath.

Filled the place with a monstrous undergrowth,

Prickly, and pulpous, and blistering, and blue, Livid, and starred with a lurid dew.

And agarics, and fungi, with mildew and mould

Started like mist from the wet ground cold; Pale, fleshy, as if the decaying dead With a spirit of growth had been animated!

Spawn, weeds, and filth, a leprous scum, Made the running rivulet thick and dumb, And at its outlet flags huge as stakes Dammed it up with roots knotted like watersnakes.

And hour by hour, when the air was still,
The vapours arose which have strength to kill;
At morn they were seen, at noon they were
felt,

At night they were darkness no star could melt.

And unctuous meteors from spray to spray Crept and flitted in broad noonday Unseen; every branch on which they alit By a venomous blight was burned and bit. The Sensitive Plant, like one forbid, Wept, and the tears within each lid Of its folded leaves, which together grew, Were changed to a blight of frozen glue.

For the leaves soon fell, and the branches soon By the heavy axe of the blast were hewn; The sap shrank to the root through every pore As blood to a heart that will beat no more.

For Winter came: the wind was his whip: One choppy finger was on his lip: He had torn the cataracts from the hills And they clanked at his girdle like manacles;

His breath was a chain which without a sound The earth, and the air, and the water bound; He came, fiercely driven, in his chariot-throne By the tenfold blasts of the Arctic zone.

Then the weeds which were forms of living death

Fled from the frost to the earth beneath. Their decay and sudden flight from frost Was but like the vanishing of a ghost!

And under the roots of the Sensitive Plant
The moles and the dormice died for want:
The birds dropped stiff from the frozen air
And were caught in the branches naked and

First there came down a thawing rain
And its dull drops froze on the boughs again;
Then there steamed up a freezing dew
Which to the drops of the thaw-rain grew;

And a northern whirlwind, wandering about Like a wolf that had smelt a dead child out, Shook the boughs thus laden, and heavy, and stiff,

And snapped them off with his rigid griff.

When Winter had gone and Spring came back The Sensitive Plant was a leafless wreck; But the mandrakes, and toadstools, and docks, and darnels,

Rose like the dead from their ruined charnels.

CONCLUSION.

Whether the Sensitive Plant, or that Which within its boughs like a Spirit sat, Ere its outward form had known decay, Now felt this change, I cannot say.

Whether that Lady's gentle mind, No longer with the form combined Which scattered love, as stars do light, Found sadness, where it left delight,

I dare not guess; but in this life Of error, ignorance, and strife, Where nothing is, but all things seem, And we the shadows of the dream,

It is a modest creed, and yet Pleasant if one considers it, To own that death itself must be, Like all the rest, a mockery.

That garden sweet, that lady fair, And all sweet shapes and odours there, In truth have never passed away: 'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they.

For love, and beauty, and delight, There is no death nor change: their might Exceeds our organs, which endure No light, being themselves obscure.