

## What Percy Shelley taught me about being remembered

Larry Moffitt  
September 25, 2013



Percy Shelly's statue

After you pass on, you have no control over the kinds of monuments people make to remember you by. I hope I fare better than Shelley's statue.

On 8 July 1822, less than a month before his 30th birthday, Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned in a sudden storm while sailing off the northwest coast of Italy in his schooner. Shelley, who could be morose even on a good day, may even have wanted it that way. His body washed up on the shore with much of the skin eaten away, his clothing nearly gone and a boot missing.

That's all that was left of the Percy Shelley who wrote "Ozymandias," Shelley, the philosopher-poet and husband of the author of Frankenstein. What was left of Shelley is what's left of all of us: guts, tissue and soul. Shelley had a rampaging soul and the long, lyrical phrasings of his poems can leave you searching for a place to breathe. A privileged and mystic iconoclast, he never let the silver spoon in his mouth get in the way of expressing his rage against the machine. His writing style conveys this drama and intensity. Not someone whose order you would want to get wrong at the Eagle and Child.

There tends to be lamentation, grief and a wet, rotting leaves kind of language in Shelly's poetry that can leave you in a deep brown study.

The dead are sleeping in their sepulchres:  
And, mouldering as they sleep, a thrilling sound,  
Half sense half thought, among the darkness stirs,  
Breathed from their wormy beds all living things around,

**Incredible beauty in those words, but after reading Shelley, I need a hug.**

The sculptor Edward Ford created a memorial statue of Shelley. It wasn't a rendering of the poet in a coffee house with goose quill in hand or sitting at the hearth being urbane with Lord Byron and Keats. Instead, Ford sculpted a likeness of Shelley's soggy, lifeless, naked body, a marble version of the way he looked laying on the beach where they cremated him.

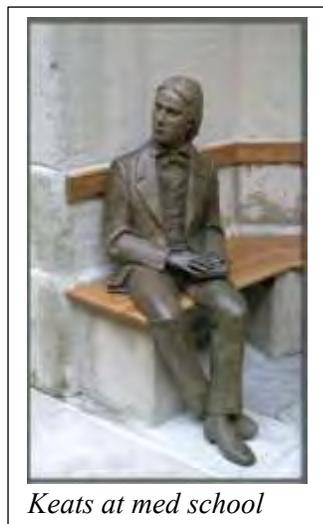
Shelley was kicked out of Oxford 200 years ago for being an outspoken atheist. But after Oxford itself became atheist, they built a special nook for Shelley's drowned rat statue with inset mood lights capturing

snippets of his poetry on the surrounding walls. It's there today, sitting on an ornate pedestal made up of carvings of the requisite bare-bosomed lass and a couple of winged creatures from someone's nightmare.

The statue is highly acclaimed as a work of art, but it seems unfair to have one's best-known memorial be a sculpture of one's soggy carcass. Where's the dignity? What was Edward Ford thinking?

I wonder what the poet himself thinks as he haunts Oxford's University College?

**John Keats, who lived at the same time, started writing poetry at 19 and died from tuberculosis at 25.**



*Keats at med school*

For a poet, dying young can be a good strategy. If it weren't for Keats' verse, not one person would remember him today. Keats' work was semi-ignored while he lived. His death, however, gave it a quality of rarity (plus it is honestly good stuff), and by the end of the 1800s, he was revered everywhere. There is a nice, dignified bronze statue of him at Guy's Hospital in London, where he studied medicine. He is depicted sitting on a bench, his hands resting on a book in his lap.

**Isadora Duncan, the great American dancer had a spectacular demise in 1927, worthy of her flamboyance.**

While standing in the passenger seat of a convertible, she ostentatiously threw the long flowing scarf, for which she was famous, around her neck and trailing behind her as she shouted a devil-may-care "Je vais à l'amour" ("I'm off to love.") to her friends. The scarf hung outside the roadster, where it was picked up by the back tire and wrapped as the car sped away. Ms.

Duncan was yanked backward out of the car and onto the pavement, her neck snapped.

I suppose some jerk could have named an Olympic dive after Isadora, but it didn't happen. Her statue rightly depicts the woman as the free spirited, inspiration and barrier-breaking revolutionary she was in life.

There are lessons galore in death's circumstances. Nelson Rockefeller died of a heart attack, tongues wag, while atop the lovely Megan. "Rockefeller Comes and Goes," one headline read. The joke that emerged to top all others was that Rockefeller died from low blood pressure – 70 over 23. His wife had him cremated, like, instantly, without an autopsy (eliminating any errant fluids). But history knows, and we await the statue with trepidation.

**If I were ever invited to an orgy I would worry, what if I choke on a chicken bone at the buffet while I'm there?**

What would my statue at Oxford look like? I fear it would not depict me the way I look most of the time, including weekends – standing atop a mountain, gazing sagely into the distance. With chiseled abs.

I try to think, what are the deal-breakers of my reputation. Consider Judas, who was probably an Eagle Scout with Oak Leaf Cluster, but whose one, small misstep (selling out Jesus), seems to be the only thing people talk about these days.

Likewise, a lifelong sonofabitch can come through in the last minute. John Newton repents for his part in the slave trade and writes the song, "Amazing Grace." Ebenezer Scrooge awakens after a three-night bender, filled with the milk of human kindness. He buys the fat goose in the window for the Cratchet family, gives Bob a freakin' day off with an extra bucket of coal. Buys medicine for Tiny Tim. And suddenly he's standing by the spinet, cup of mulled cider in hand, singing "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen."

I cry when someone sings Battle Hymn of the Republic, so you can imagine what I must look like after listening to one of these stories.

So what's with Percy Shelley's statue? Maybe through no fault of Shelley, he was simply chosen by an instructive God, to be a lesson for us all. Or hell, maybe it's just a statue. But when I gaze down on Shelly's dead, atheist cadaver, it is not with scorn. As I lurch herky-jerky through my own life, always two steps forward and one back, I am no better than Shelley. Will I find an "Ebenezer Scrooge rescue" for me?



*The landmark Eagle and Child pub at Oxford, exists. I don't just pull this stuff out of thin air.*

Nobody gets out of here in one piece and without regrets. And truthfully, not without stains and blemishes either. Shelley wrote, "Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, stains the white radiance of Eternity." We leave our mark, in other words.

And in truth, my final minutes are not as worrisome for me as my final two or three decades. But that's another essay. There is this brief life, and then there is the eternity that comes after. Many proclaim with certainty, what that eternity is all about. But nobody can prove it. My two cents is that the odds favor creating happiness, making meaning, family, beauty, joy and love in one's life, as opposed to sowing destruction.

Your memorial statue could be around a long time, not to mention your soul.

Go ahead and take a minute to ponder eternity if you want, we still have a little time here. What is eternity anyway?

"Eternity is really long," Woody Allen said, "especially near the end."