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Narratological Analysis of P. B. Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant"

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Abstract

This paper offers a transgeneric narratological analysis of narrative voice, temporality, and metalepsis in P. B. Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant," a poem whose narrative architecture remains insufficiently examined. Drawing chiefly on Genette's and Stanzel's frameworks, the analysis argues that the poem initially establishes a sensory garden-world through an overt, heterodiegetic narrator who employs leitmotifs and cyclical temporality. The concluding movement, however, introduces authorial intrusion and first-person epistemic hesitation that complicate the narrator's reliability. A transformative metalepsis then reorients the reader from the phenomenal world of the garden toward a transcendent realm of ideal love and beauty. This structural rupture catalyses an evolution in narrative voice from descriptive apparent objectivity to a speculative, philosophical mode. By combining transgeneric narratology with a reader-oriented approach, the study clarifies the poem's complex narrative framework and its philosophical implications.

1. Introduction

Narrative is an essential process for meaningfully conveying and conceiving what passes through our senses. It is indispensable in all literature, written or oral, poetic or prose. In essence, narrative is not only transgeneric but "an international, transcultural, transhistorical" phenomenon (Barthes, 1977, p. 79). It possesses a generically fluid character and a multidimensional quality that allows it to function as an umbrella across diverse major fields and sciences: "Analysis of narrative is no longer the province of literary study alone; it has penetrated all the human sciences, and practicing professions" (Riessman, 2005, p. 5). Its power derives from a unique temporal dynamic: while narrative is typically retrospective, "in the sense that the teller is looking back on events and relating them in the past tense, but a reader or listener experiences these events for the first time, as quasi-present" (Currie, 2007, pp. 29–30). This structural malleability allows narrative to "accommodate contradictory experience and the complexity of experience" (Johns, 2010, p. 69). As Phelan (2005) argues, narrative is not merely a structure but a rhetorical act of 'multilayered communications' that "invite or even require their audience to engage with them cognitively, physically, emotionally, and ethically" (p. 5). It is this very pliability that makes "the transgeneric application of narratological concepts to poetry apt to highlight the specificity of poetry" (Hühn, 2004, p. 151). Hühn simply stated that "poetry can profitably be analysed on the basis of narratological categories" (2007). Therefore, this paper turns its attention to the specific dimension of narrative voice and its intricate relationship with narrative temporality, particularly the

distinction between narrative speed (ellipsis, pause, summary) and the time of narration (subsequent, prior, simultaneous, interpolated). Following the work of narratologists such as Genette and Stanzel, we understand this voice not merely as a textual function but as an acoustic presence that can be heard in the "mind's ear," whom we designate the narrator.

This analysis aims to apply this robust narratological framework to a relatively neglected work in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry, "The Sensitive Plant." This poem is structured by the extra-fictional narrator into three distinct parts and a conclusion, each section interlocking to form a coherent narrative entity. This structure, in turn, participates in a larger, interdependent juxtaposition with other poems in Shelley's oeuvre, albeit with significant deviations in its narratorial strategy. Here, the narrators operate less as vehicles for philosophical exposition and more as conduits for a distinctive poeticity. A survey of the poem's genesis reveals that its composition was inspired by the garden of Lady Mountcashell (referred to as Mrs. Mason) in Italy (Bieri, 2008, pp. 519–521). This biographical context positions the work upon a foundation of Personal Experience Narrative (PEN), inflected with calculated Authorial Intrusion (AI) and projected through a complex interplay of a First-Person Narrator (FPN) and an authorial narrative voice. A preliminary analysis discloses a predominantly retrospective narrative, articulated in the past tense, which alternates between third-person and first-person narrators. This narrative demonstrates how transgeneric narratology can offer a powerful new lens for interpreting poetic narrative and opening up fresh avenues for literary analysis. The analysis brings Genette's account of narrative voice, order, duration, frequency, and metalepsis into direct dialogue with Stanzel's distinction between authorial and experiential narrative situations. It is this complex narratological architecture that the present paper investigates, pursuing the following research objectives:

(1) Providing a deeper, illuminative understanding of the poem's narrative complexity and imaginative force.
(2) Analysing narrative techniques such as voice and time.
(3) Examining the extent to which such a study, by virtue of its range of narrative devices, can contribute to narratological discussions in poetry for constructing meaning in the said poem.

2. The Narratological Analysis

2.1 Narrative Situations and Shifting Voices

Percy Bysshe Shelley's narrative poem "The Sensitive Plant" commences through a narrative situation that situates the discourse within a recollected past: "A Sensitive Plant in a garden grew / And the young winds fed it with silver dew" (Shelley, 2002, Part I, lines 1–2). This type of narrative is "characterized by the omniscience of a narrator who is not a participant in the situations and events recounted" (Prince, 2003, p. 9) and, therefore, can be classified in Genette's taxonomy as *heterodiegetic*, and in Stanzel's typology as *authorial*. It invokes a distinct spatial and temporal framework that "maps a world through the cycle of the seasons—Spring, Winter, Autumn, Summer—and across a geography that moves from a localised garden to mythic and volcanic landscapes like 'the waves of Baiae… /…smoke of Vesuvius'" (Part III, lines 3–4). The narrative discourse is further characterised by its fluid mobility. This narrative is not fixed but oscillates dynamically across a spectrum of perceptual modes, with a privileged, omniscient reach. It possesses access to the psychological interiors of non-human entities, as evidenced in lines such as "Of the love which it felt from the leaf to the root" (Part I, line 71), and remains cognisant of figures who "gaze on their eyes in the stream's recess" (Part I, line 19). Visual modes are introduced via passive observation ('is seen'), as in: "That the light of its tremulous bells is seen / Through their pavilions of tender green" (Part I, lines 23–24). Actional verbs ('rose,' 'blows,' 'cradled') alternate with stative assertions that establish objective facts: "For the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower" (Part I, line 74). This structure is formally codified by a stark narratological shift across the poem's architecture.

Throughout Parts I, II, and most of III, the narrative operates as a classic heterodiegetic text, maintaining an air of objective, unequivocal omniscience while focusing on the events of the diegesis; however, concealed subjectivity erupts, inserting doubts and philosophical speculations through direct admissions in the Conclusion: "I dare not guess" (line 122).

This subjectivity relies on a retrospective narrative consciousness that carefully manages the critical distance between the experiencing-self and the narrating-self. This division is sharpened by the temporal deixis of "now" in "Now felt this change, I cannot say" (Concl., line 117), marking the gap between the past experiencing-self (who "saw") and the presenting narrating-self who recalls the loss. Consequently, the narration becomes a composite, moving, as Richardson notes, "not between two grammatical forms, but between two narrative postures" (1994, p. 19). It oscillates between an observer—"I doubt not the flowers of that garden sweet" (Part II, line 29)—and an authorial, heterodiegetic voice describing "A Lady, the wonder of her kind" (Part II, line 5). The progression from third-person past to first-person present reflection creates what Richardson terms "a more profound, reflexive, and unsettling narrative topography" (1994, p. 317). This vocal instability is compounded by a second-person ("you") narrative that directly invokes a specific narratee: "Her step seemed to pity the grass it pressed; / You might hear by the heaving of her breast" (Part II, lines 21–22). As Jahn (2005) clarifies, "the 'you' that first-person or authorial narrators use for addressing their narratees" (para. N3.3.11). Finally, the pronounced frequency of third-person feminine pronouns ("her beauty, her kind, her mien") is normalised within this retrospective frame; the global statistical predominance of third-person forms ("she," "it," "they") anchors the narrative's dominant typology within an authorial mode under Stanzel's (1981) classification.

This narrative structure of the poem is characterised by a shifting orchestration of voices and diegetic levels employed to render the immanent life of the garden. The narration is saturated with evaluative adjectives—'sweet,' 'sweetest,' 'fabulous,' 'fair,' 'undefiled,' 'unlovely,' 'gentle'—that construct a highly specific, affective perspective on the storyworld. This culminates in a metaphysical judgement where death is perceived as a 'mockery' and existence is proposed to be "the shadows of the dream" (Concl., line 125). The accretion of such judgements fosters a narrative reliability that becomes increasingly suspect, thereby raising questions about the very stability and authority of the narration. The projection of a subjective state onto the plant can be seen in lines: "But none ever trembled and panted with bliss // Like a doe in the noontide with love's sweet want / As the companionless Sensitive Plant" (Part I, lines 9–12). This narrator is ostensibly heterodiegetic, situated as an observer external to the storyworld. However, the pervasive use of actional, sensual, and mental verbs suggests a covert presence—one that is meticulously detailing the Lady's actions and the synesthetic communication of her being: "But her tremulous breath and her flushing face / Told" (Part II, lines 14–15) and "Her step seemed to pity the grass it pressed" (Part II, line 21). This mode gives way to a densely narrative texture, saturated with synesthetic imagery that blurs sensory boundaries: "and soft moths that kiss / The sweet lips of the flowers" (Part II, lines 50–51), where "fresh odours" in the garden are rendered as a substitute for, or perhaps even as, a form of voice itself. This voice, which creates a world of interpenetrated harmony, can thus be understood as figural-authorial. Furthermore, the narrative weaves its discourse with another textuality. It perceives death through a philosophical lens shared with *"Prometheus Unbound"*—"death itself must be / Like all the rest, a mockery" (Concl., lines 128–29)—and re-narrates a core Platonic principle: "Where nothing is, but all things seem / And we the shadows of the dream" (Concl., lines 128–29). This culminates in the final epistemological shift, where the narrative voice resolves the poem's tension by redefining reality itself: "That garden sweet, that lady fair // In truth have never passed away: / 'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they'" (Concl., lines 130–33). The story, therefore, was never fundamentally about loss, but about the flawed nature of human perception. In the Conclusion of the poem, this narrative undergoes a decisive transformation, becoming overtly reflective.

In sum, the poem is a mutable construct, articulated by an authorial narrative which traverses the spectrum from covert to overt heterodiegetic modes.

2.2 Temporality and Allegorical Plot

The narrative fabric of Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant" is woven from the inseparable threads of temporal structure and narrative content, each informing the other to produce the poem's profound philosophical argument. A Genettean analysis reveals a complex temporal architecture, where the interplay of order, duration, and frequency constructs a world in flux. The narrative is predominantly analeptic, recounted through the past tense ("a garden grew," "the Spring arose"), establishing a retrospective frame for the fictional events. This retrospective voice, however, strategically ruptures its own tense to incorporate a synoptic present for philosophical indeterminacy ("I doubt") and a proleptic glimpse of finality: "As blood to a heart that will beat no more" (Part III, line 85). This embedded narrative is further complicated by its manipulation of duration, which accelerates through explicit ellipsis ("three days, the fourth day") and also accelerates through seasonal summaries: "Swift Summer into the Autumn flowed" (Part II, line 22), "Winter had gone and Spring came back" (Part III, line 110). Yet it decelerates into descriptive pauses that luxuriate in the sensory world, as in:

> *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.*
> (Part I, lines 45–48)

Finally, the poem employs an iterative frequency: "whereby what happens n times is recounted once" (Prince, 2003, p. 47). The narrative recounts once what occurred across multiple moments, a technique that establishes a cyclical baseline only to be violently disrupted: "And each flower and herb on Earth's dark breast / Rose from the dreams of its wintry rest" (Part I, lines 7–8). Many of the poem's early events are iterative: the narrator presents actions or states as characteristic of the garden's life rather than as one-time occurrences. The flowers bloom, the plant responds, and the Lady tends the garden as if these acts belong to a continuing stable order. The Lady's death permanently breaks this iterative pattern: "And ere the first leaf looked brown—she died!" (Part II, line 60). Once that catastrophic event occurs, the poem can no longer narrate the garden as a stable system of repeated relations.

The blend of analeptic and proleptic order, married to a rhythm of accelerated and decelerated narration, creates a temporal experience that is explicitly non-linear. This intricate temporal scheme is the very engine of the poem's plot, or what Herman and Vervaeck (2005) insist is the essential "content" with which any valuable narratological analysis must connect (p. 4). The macro-structure of the poem maps onto a symbolic arc of seasons, moving from the suspended, mythical time of a perfect Spring in Part I, through the zenith and catastrophic rupture of Summer in Part II, and into the frantic, linear descent into Winter in Part III. This progression from cyclical to historical time is the physical manifestation of the plot's core elements.

Consequently, the poem's setting and plot eschew conventional realism to function as the constitutive elements of a philosophical allegory. This narrative can be schematised into three distinct phases, each defined by its symbolic ecology:

1. **The Prelapsarian Microcosm (Part I):** The garden is introduced as a self-contained paradise, a microcosm containing "all rare blossoms from every clime" (Part I, line 39). This setting embodies a state of perfect, prelapsarian harmony.
2. **The Ordered Realm and its Soul (Part II):** The paradisiacal setting persists, but its maintenance is now explicitly linked to a governing intelligence—the Lady, described as "an Eve in this Eden" (Part II, line 2). Her presence represents a "ruling Grace," the active

principle that orders the natural world. The Lady's presence is the organising principle of the storyworld. When she dies, the garden does not simply lose one character; it loses the principle that makes its relations harmonious.

3. **The Postlapsarian Wasteland (Part III):** The Lady's death catalyses a violent inversion of the initial setting. The aesthetic binaries of the poem are overturned: "sinuous paths" become "bent and tangled," the "running rivulet" grows "thick and dumb," and the scene is ultimately conquered by a tyrannical, personified Winter who binds the world in a "chain" of ice. The setting transforms from a nurturing garden into a lifeless prison.

The plot follows a corresponding arc of Paradise → Fall → Decay → Philosophical Resolution. This appears not as a plot of human drama but one of cosmic process and consequence. The exposition establishes a state of bliss and introduces the hyper-aware yet passive protagonist, the Sensitive Plant, whose central conflict is its inability to actively reciprocate the love it feels:

> *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,—*
> (Shelley, 2002, Part I, lines 70–73)

The complication is the introduction and subsequent death of the Lady, functioning as the narrative's definitive 'fall': "This fairest creature from earliest Spring // And ere the first leaf looked brown—she died!" (Part II, lines 57–60). The climax and falling action consist of the prolonged, detailed process of decay, a systematic unravelling of the natural world. The denouement, however, is radically unconventional; it rejects narrative restoration in favour of a transcendent idealism: "'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they" (Concl., line 133). The subsequent evaluation is the garden's transformation into a "cold and foul" state; the resolution is the ironic return of spring that revives only weeds; and the final coda—defined as "an indication that the story is over and/or its moral" (De Jong, 2014, p. 39)—is achieved in the assertion that "For love, and beauty, and delight / There is no death nor change" (Concl., lines 134–35).

2.3 Metaleptic Rupture and Philosophical Transcendence

In Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant," narrative structure is not merely a container for meaning but the primary vehicle for its philosophical argument. The poem employs a sophisticated interplay of cyclicality and metalepsis to deconstruct its own fictional world and point toward a transcendent ideal. The narrative fabric is framed by a profound, yet ultimately broken, circularity. The discourse commences in a vivid Spring that arises "on the garden fair / Like the Spirit of Love felt everywhere" (Part I, lines 5–6), and appears to close by circularly affirming in the Conclusion that "all sweet shapes and odours there / In truth have never passed away" (Concl., lines 131–32). This structural circularity operates simultaneously on temporal, thematic, and epistemological levels. The subject matter, focused intensely on the beauty of nature, concludes by confirming that "For love, and beauty, and delight / There is no death nor change" (Concl., lines 134–35), while the shifting perceptions of the poem move from sensory wonder to a philosophical recognition of the limitation of human organs. However, this circularity is deeply ironic. The literal return of Spring in the poem's denouement does not restore the prelapsarian paradise established in Part I. Instead, it resurrects only physical corruption and decay: "the mandrakes, and toadstools, and docks, and darnels" (Part III, line 112). This is not a true mythic cycle of cosmic renewal but a closed loop of physical degeneration—a broken circle that encloses a tomb rather than a living garden. On a purely literal level, the historical narrative reveals itself to be a tragedy of irreversible loss. This tragic linearity is resolved and subverted through a radical use of narrative metalepsis—the deliberate

transgression of boundaries between narrative levels, defined as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe" (Genette, 1980, pp. 234–235). Shelley utilises this device through minor localised disruptions before deploying it as a major ontological rupture. Early in the poem, the narrator uses a parenthetical tercet to breach the diegetic boundary, comparing the awakening flowers to an infant soothed by its mother's singing: "The flowers (as an infant's awakening eyes / Smile on its mother, whose singing sweet / Can first lull, and at last must awaken it)" (Part I, lines 59–61). A similarly localised metalepsis occurs during the description of the nightingale's "Elysian chant" where the punctuation explicitly signals an authorial aside detached from the immediate timeline of the garden:

> *(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);—*
> (Part I, lines 106–109)

The most devastating and philosophically significant metaleptic break, however, is reserved for the Conclusion. Here the heterodiegetic omniscient voice that dominated the descriptive portions of the poem suddenly abandons its authority. The narrator steps forward into a speculative and hesitant first-person voice, admitting: "I dare not guess; but in this life / Of error, ignorance, and strife…" (Concl., lines 122–23). This transition constitutes a profound metalepsis. The narrator of the story steps across the boundary of the fiction to question the very reality of the history that has just been related, explicitly categorising the preceding narrative of the decay as a mere "dream" and its characters as human "shadows." This calculated structural manoeuvre destabilises the reader's immersion and fundamentally reframes the literal narrative. By disrupting the narrative levels, Shelley enacts his core Platonic argument through form rather than mere exposition. The broken circularity of the physical story demonstrates the inevitable decay of the material, phenomenal world. The concluding metalepsis then performs a philosophical salvation by shattering the illusion of the narrative itself: it strips the material world of its ontological permanence and asserts that true reality resides in an eternal, noumenal realm beyond human mutability. The poem establishes a dualistic model of time: the phenomenal time of the diegesis—which is corrupted from a mythic cycle into a historical line of decay—and a transcendent, noumenal time wherein the garden and the Lady "have never passed away" (Concl., line 132). The ultimate meaning of "The Sensitive Plant" is, thus, fully realised within the structural tension generated between its tragic plot and its metaleptic, philosophical frame.

2.4 Mythic Substrata, Narrative Authority and Autobiographical Impulse

The narrative of "The Sensitive Plant" is woven from a rich tapestry of mythological systems, each providing a distinct structural layer. Classical myths converge to shape the poem's narrative logic, as in "And the Naiad-like lily of the vale" (Part I, line 21), "As a Maenad, its moonlight-coloured cup" (Part I, line 33), and "And narcissi, the fairest among them all" (Part I, line 18); Christian evidence such as "An Eve in this Eden; a ruling Grace" (Part II, line 2), "And from this undefiled Paradise" (Part I, line 58); and Platonic elements such as "Where nothing is, but all things seem / And we the shadows of the dream" (Concl., lines 124–25). The classical figures provide a sensory texture, the Christian fall draws the plot arc, and the Platonic theory gives the philosophical resolution. The immediate sensuous life of the garden is textured with direct references to Greek mythologies, such as 'Naiad, Nymph and Maenad'—female spirits of nature whose presence populates the "undefiled Paradise" (Part I, line 58) and aligns with a narrative perspective that, as Saleh and Khan (2020) note, "sees women as a source of every goodness and beauty" (p. 202). This gynocentric principle, characterised by virtue, benevolence, compassion, and sympathy, creates a "mutual

atmosphere" of love. Further deepening this classical stratum, the direct reference to "Narcissi" invokes the self-involved and self-destructive myth of Narcissus, thereby introducing a subtle tragic flaw into the prelapsarian garden. These classical elements are framed by a larger Christian mythic structure, which provides the narrative arc of a perfect creation, a tragic fall (the Lady's death), and a corrupted world. The poem's denouement, however, resolves this arc not with Christian redemption but with a Platonic mythos, asserting that the fallen narrative was an illusion and that true reality is eternal and unchanging.

This complex mythic scaffolding is narrated by a voice whose authority and position resist straightforward structuralist classification, giving rise to what may be called an autodiegetic authorial presence: while the discourse commences with the formal, objective distance of an extra-fictional, heterodiegetic narrator, it unravels with the emergence of the FPN in expressions of epistemic doubt, such as "I doubt" and "but all things seem" (Part III, line 124). Such a shift, as Herman (2006) suggests, marks a critical loss of certainty, for "fictional facts reported by third-person narrators have an authority… lacking in first-person reports" (p. 76). The narrator's reliance on evaluative and expletive language ("every branch," "every sound," "every clime," "every one," and "every pore") further signals a subjective, experiencing consciousness rather than a fully omniscient one. Consequently, the narrative seems to resist straightforward Genettean classification. While it begins unequivocally as heterodiegetic, it unfolds to reveal an intradiegetic layer, as the narrator who claims "I doubt not the flowers of that garden sweet" (Part II, line 29) implicitly positions themselves as a witness or imaginative participant. This creates a narratological paradox: the voice is simultaneously extradiegetic to the main story and intradiegetic to its own philosophical reflection. The narrative can, thus, be understood as a form of metaphorical allegory, operating via a heterodiegetic voice that uses emotional identification with a diegetic proxy to form a lyrical autodiegetic authorial presence, where the questioned reliability of the voice is not a structural failure, but a constitutive feature of the poem's philosophical inquiry into human perception, change, and reality.

2.5 Narrative Strategies: Punctuation and Sound

2.5.1 Punctuation as Diegetic Agency

While often treated as mere grammatical convention, punctuation in "The Sensitive Plant" operates via a sophisticated diegetic technique, actively structuring narrative voice, temporality, and the reader's phenomenological experience of the storyworld. The authorial narrator employs a full repertoire of punctuation marks—commas, semicolons, colons, parentheses, exclamation marks, and the aposiopesis (the double hyphen or dash)—not as neutral signals but as agents of narrativity: "And ere the first leaf looked brown—she died!" (Part II, line 60). These marks perform a range of interpretive functions. This is exemplified by the *aposiopesis*, which Baldick (2001) defines as a "Rhetorical device in which the speaker suddenly breaks off in the middle of a sentence" (p. 17), creating a rupture that signifies powerful, inexpressible emotion or cognitive arrest. On a narratological level, specific marks serve distinct diegetic functions:

(4) **The Comma and Dash:** These create a breathless, accumulative rhythm, slowing the reading pace to force a lingering focus on each sensory detail. This technique builds a dense, unsustainable vision of paradise, as in the slow unveiling of the rose, where commas act as a narrative pause, heightening diegetic tension.

(5) **The Semicolon and Colon:** These function as structural pillars, establishing a hierarchy of information within complex sentences. The semicolon pivots between related clauses "The sweetest flower for scent that blows; / And all rare blossoms…" (Part I, lines 38–39), while the colon often acts as a narrative trump card, synthesising preceding thoughts and diegetically linking internal desire to external fulfilment.

(6) **The Exclamation Mark:** Deployed sparingly, this mark signals key emotional and philosophical peaks, such as the Plant's fundamental desire for "the Beautiful!," injecting the narrative voice with a surge of thematic emphasis.

(7) **The Parenthesis:** This creates an intimate narrative aside, a whispered diegetic commentary that incorporates a secondary layer of the storyworld, like the song of the "sweet nightingale."

This meticulously punctuated narrative, however, undergoes a profound shift that is central to the poem's meaning. Its narrative is reinforced by the controlled, connective punctuation structuring the prelapsarian world. This shift is enacted not just through diction but through a fundamental change in punctuation's role—from building a coherent world to articulating its breakdown and transcendence. Through the precise orchestration of punctuation, Shelley transcends mere description; he sculpts the reader's temporal journey, making the silent marks of punctuation active participants in the narrative's movement from sensory immersion to philosophical transcendence.

2.5.2 Sonic Narrative

The poem's narrative is articulated not only through its visual and thematic breaks but, more profoundly, through its orchestration of sound. Far from serving as mere musical accompaniment, the sonic dimension operates as a parallel diegesis, a story in itself whose rising and falling cadences mirror and intensify the primary plot. This sonic narrative is constructed through the strategic deployment of specific phonemes that correlate with atmospheric and psychological states. The narrator foregrounds certain consonants to generate particular effects: the continuant consonants /w/ and /f/ evoke the "wind" and "easy movement" (e.g., "For Winter came: the wind was his whip" (Part III, line 86); "fold after fold, to the fainting air" (Part I, line 31)). The sibilant /s/ produces a sense of "smoothness" ("soft moths that kiss / The sweet lips of the flowers" (Part II, lines 50–51)). In contrast, the harsher /z/ appears sparingly, associated lexically with the "Arctic zone, frozen, freezing, froze." This phonological patterning evidences a world whose inherent beauty remains consistent across seasons, a stability encapsulated in the line: "'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they" (Concl., line 133). Further enriching this auditory texture, the nasal consonants /m/, /n/, and /ŋ/ are woven into the "music" of the natural world, as in the "many murmurings" of the nightingale or the branches. The liquid /l/ conveys both "liquids in motion" and a sense of "voluptuousness" ("water-lilies lay tremulously" (Part I, line 45)). The plosives /t/, /b/, and /p/ articulate "quickness and movement" (Ufot, 2013, pp. 119–120) such as brief activity in "Can first lull, and at last must awaken it" (Part I, line 61); "Her step seemed to pity the grass it pressed" (Part II, line 21). The poem's vowel system similarly reinforces its narrative arc. The rhyme scheme frequently relies on monosyllabic words whose nuclei are long vowels and diphthongs (e.g., *grew/dew* [u:], *light/night* [aɪ], *vale/pale* [eɪ]), which, as noted by Ufot, "are generally preferred for peaceful, solemn and contemplative subjects" (p. 123). Conversely, rhymes built upon short vowels (e.g., *breast/nest* [e], *that/sat* [æ]) and triphthongs (*endure/obscure* [jʊə]) are fewer and, according to Ufot, "represent quick movement, agitation or triviality" (p. 123). Furthermore, the poem employs anapestic meter: "This foot creates a feeling of urgency or forward momentum, often used in fast-paced, energetic poetry" (Saxena, 2025, p. 280). These phonological and prosodic structures thus enhance the poem's narrativity, guiding our perception from a wondrous garden saturated with sweet sounds to a state of ephemeral disturbance. In essence, the poet-narrator makes us listen to the life and death of a universe. The final, silent "leafless wreck."

2.6 The Allegorical Garden: Figuration as Narrative Identity

The narrativity of this garden-like narration is profoundly constituted through its figurative textures. Moving beyond mere sonic patterning, the poetic narrator orchestrates a dense field of figures of speech which collectively amplify the narrative's aesthetic resonance and

interpretive depth. The title itself functions as a primary locus of narrative instability, inviting a plurality of readings. It operates as a metaphor for universal humanity or, more specifically, for the poet-narrator's own hypersensitive condition: "But none ever trembled and panted with bliss / As the companionless Sensitive Plant" (Part I, lines 11–12). As Maniquis (1969) suggests, "The Sensitive Plant" "became a popular cliché in metaphors for human sensibility" (p. 145), and further notes that the poem is "a mass of similes placed in the context of the general simile of plant life and human life" (p. 146). This figuration extends into the symbolic, where the plant may be read as a representation of a specific social stratum, of isolated individuals, or of the extra-fictional narrator's own introversion. This reading of solitude finds support in Moore's assertion that the poet "holds aloof from the common run. He has no desire to be 'in the swim,' but off in a little nook by himself" (1922, p. 19), a sentiment echoed by Maniquis's biographical observation that "Certainly Shelley had a good bit of mimosa sensibility" (1969, p. 144). Furthermore, the narrative constructs the Plant as an allegory for the individual who privileges interiority over superficial appearance: "For the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower // It loves, even like Love, its deep heart is full / It desires what it has not" (Part I, lines 76–77). As per Genette's classification, it can be considered a pseudo-diegetic narration, which Van Aken and Vandekerkhof (2015) translate as referring "to a telling as if it were diegetic but has nevertheless been presented as metadiegetic in its principle or origin (Genette, 1980, p. 236)" (p. 88). They interpret this definition by stating that it "takes place in the viewer's cognitive process, not in the text" (2015, p. 88). This creates a hybrid lyrical voice: structurally heterodiegetic, but rhetorically and emotionally autodiegetic, allowing the poet's consciousness to saturate the phenomenal world without violating the formal narrative level. This allegorical function is central; Bieri (2008) confirms the poem's polyvalence by reading it as either personal or political allegory (p. 521). Crucially, the narrative focalises the Sensitive Plant, whose attributes—over-sensitivity, loneliness, melancholy, and a capacity for deep love—mirror those of the extra-fictional narrator. This mirroring establishes a narratorial worldview where life is synonymous with love, a principle articulated by Shelley: "Love is celebrated everywhere as the sole law which should govern the moral world" (Hutchinson, 2002, p. 22). Consequently, the sensitive plant can be transcribed as an act of altero-characterisation. Therefore, the narrative is a complex amalgam of allegorical and metaphoric modes. It embeds self- and re-narratives within its primary diegesis, a strategy that simultaneously enriches its narrativity and complicates any singular analysis of its narratorial voice. The result is a text whose figurative complexity is the very engine of its narrative power.

2.7 Texture of Contemplation: Leitmotifs and Narrative of Change

The narrative of "The Sensitive Plant" is textured by a series of recurring leitmotifs, central among them the Romantic preoccupation with states of dream, slumber, and sleep: "Rose from the dreams of its wintry rest" (Part I, line 8). Monorchio (2014) observes that this constellation of motifs constitutes "one of the main leitmotifs of European Romantic literature" (p. 3), and here it serves to precondition a world imbued with an aura of nature, beauty, and peace. These leitmotifs are not isolated but are tightly interwoven with other narrative elements to create a cohesive atmospheric whole. The prevailing mood of the narrative, following Genette's conception of mood as a function of narrative 'distance,' is one of external observation, wherein the author tells the story as a contemplative witness (Genette, 1980). This contemplative mode is inflected by what Reiman (1976) identifies as an "urbane tone" (p. 110), which frames a poetic discourse concerned with impermanence and the nature of beauty in the world. This contemplative, urbane observation is fundamentally directed toward the core principle of narrative itself: change. The relations within the narrative are explicitly causal: "The garden, once fair, became cold and foul / Like the corpse of her who had been its soul" (Part III, lines 17–18). The death of the Lady and the onslaught of a severe winter directly bring about the garden's decay. This aligns with Domsch's (2020) proposition that "While narrative

is essentially and fundamentally about change […] about a disturbance of balance and 'things falling apart,'" (p. 5). The poem, however, presents a nuanced version of this change. The narrative here, while containing events, functions as an effusion of the poet-narrator's concentrated perception. The focus is less on a sequence of dramatic actions and more on conveying the sensory and existential quality of the garden's beauty, its varieties, and its ultimate metamorphosis, with the Sensitive Plant serving as the iconic centre of this poetic narration. To this end, the narrator orchestrates leitmotifs, mood, tone, and sound not as separate components but as an integrated system. This system works to match the narrative's atmosphere and to fuse a series of structural binaries: beauty and ugliness, day and night, light and dark, peace and violence, music and noise, life and death, and ultimately, the phenomenal world of change versus the ideal realm of non-change. The leitmotifs of dream and radiance are thus integral to the narrative's philosophical fabric, providing the symbolic language through which this contemplation on impermanence is articulated.

2.8 Metaphorical Selves: Poetic Consciousness and Characterisation

Characterisation in Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant" operates through a complex and ambiguous poetics of representation, where figures function less as conventional characters and more as symbolic nodes within a philosophical allegory. The central human figure, the Lady, is initially defined by a restricted narrative role: her actions are solely preservative, tending to the garden's flowers as "her own infants" (Part II, line 39). This narrative constancy renders her a static, almost iconic presence, a "Power" and "Grace": "There was a Power in this sweet place / An Eve in this Eden; a ruling Grace" (Part II, lines 1–2), whose form is "upborne by a lovely mind / Which, dilating, had moulded her mien and motion / Like a sea-flower unfolded beneath the ocean" (Part II, lines 6–8). Such sublime similes elevate her to a divine, mythical status, establishing her as the garden's animating soul rather than a psychologically nuanced agent.

This symbolic mode of characterisation extends to the poem's other figures. The personified Sensitive Plant, for instance, may be perceived as a form of poet-narrator. Designated by critics such as Maniquis (1969) as "a symbol of man and especially the poet" (p. 130), the Plant's hyper-awareness and passive receptivity serve as a metaphor for the sensitive, intrusive narrator's own consciousness. Similarly, the nightingale—which sings "to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds"—directly echoes Shelley's own definition of the poet from *"A Defence of Poetry"* as "a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude" (Shelley, 1840/1909), as versed in the poem: "Ever sang more sweet as the day might fail" (Part I, line 107). This intertextual resonance suggests that these figures are not merely elements of the diegesis but are potential altero-characterisations—externalised projections of the narrator's own creative and existential state. This reading produces a compelling narratological paradox: the voice that narrates the garden maintains the ontological distance of a heterodiegetic narrator, yet through its profound identification with the Sensitive Plant and the nightingale, the narrative consciousness metaphorically and allegorically inserts a version of itself into the storyworld.

3. Conclusion

This narratological analysis demonstrates that P. B. Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant" enacts, rather than merely conveys, its philosophical inquiry through the mechanics of narrative itself. The poem orchestrates a multi-voiced narration that interrogates the reliability of sensory perception and the nature of reality. It opens with an authorial narrative situation, where meticulously punctuated, sonically textured discourse immerses the reader in a prelapsarian garden world defined by cyclical, mythical temporality. Characterisation functions symbolically: the Lady embodies an animating Soul, while the Sensitive Plant may serve as a metaphorical portrait of the extra-fictional narrator—a consciousness both pure and susceptible

to suffering. The analysis therefore privileges textual structure over biographical inference. The Lady's catalytic death precipitates a dual narrative rupture: a plot shift from mythic cycle to historical linearity, and a radical metalepsis in which the narrator transgresses the boundary between extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels. This transgression dismantles the storyworld's illusion and explicitly challenges the narrator's prior claim to omniscience. Far from undermining the poem, this metalepsis constitutes its philosophical apex, performing a Platonic transcendence that reveals the preceding narrative, with its broken circularity, as phenomenal illusion. The poem's narrative mechanics—the modulation of voice, the manipulation of temporal order and duration, and the deployment of metalepsis—function as the primary vehicles of meaning. These are realised through a complex, multi-persona narration synthesising authorial, figural, pseudo-diegetic, and scene-present perspectives. The narrative presence oscillates between a narrating and an experientially immersed self, operating via a heterodiegetic voice that uses emotional identification with a diegetic proxy to form a lyrical autodiegetic authorial presence. Through this layered narrational architecture, the poet guides the reader through a sensory phenomenology of mutability only to subvert it, ultimately asserting that true reality resides in a noumenal narrative of eternal love and beauty. Thus, the poem is read as a transgeneric narrative in which voice, temporality, and metalepsis jointly produce the movement from phenomenal loss to ideal permanence. In crossing these ontological boundaries, the text reveals the potentiality of poetic narrative when analysed through the lens of transgeneric narratology.

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