Shelley, Percy Bysshe, Morton, Timothy, Jones, Michael Owen, UK population estimated to be vegetarian or vegan, it seems that although their arguments might be valid, they still fail to contributors across the vegetarian movement were directly inspired by Shelley sustainable living. Perhaps Shelley vegetarianism after reading Percy Shelley his early death in 1822. American writers like Emerson and Thoreau, inspired by Shelley, helped to endorse the vegetarian die School of English Jason Lesser discourses, and why his radical arguments still fail to be uptaken by wider society.

The Ecological Advantages of the ‘Natural Diet’
In his ‘Vindication of Natural Diet’ (1813), Shelley not only extols the ethical and health benefits offered by a diet of plant material and pure water, but he also discusses the unsustainable nature of meat consumption. Shelley argues that ‘The quantity of nutritious vegetable matter, consumed in fattening the carcass of an ox, would afford ten times the sustenance if gathered immediately from the bosom of the earth’ (Shelley, 73), a statement which seems almost prophetic given our modern scientific understanding of how energy is lost between trophic levels. Shelley chastises the ‘monopolizing eater of animal flesh’ for ‘devouring an acre at a meal’ (Shelley, 73), and suggests that in a world where everyone adopted a plant-based diet, nutrition would be abundant. Shelley also relates this to class dynamics, arguing that ‘It is only the wealthy that can indulge the un-natural craving for dead flesh’ (Shelley, 73), and that this not only corrupts the rich, but also condemns the poor to famine. He goes as far as implying that had the ‘populace of Paris […] satisfied their hunger at the ever-furnished table of vegetable nature’ (Shelley, 72) then the French Revolution would not have occurred. Considering that since the start of the 21st century, an estimated 60-80% of deforestation in the Amazon has been attributed to cattle ranching, Shelley’s argument against the meat industry’s wasteful land usage remains profoundly prescient.

Vegetarianism’s Influence in their Literature
The Later Romantics frequently incorporated their meat-free ideology into their poetic and prosaic works. Famously, in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1817), an ambitious scientist attempts to reconstruct a human-like creature from assembled body parts. In the novel, a sustainable, moral existence is associated with vegetarianism. The monster, planning his self-exile from humanity, states:

‘My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. […] The picture I present you is peaceful and human’

— Frankenstein, Chapter 17

Here, Mary Shelley explores the ‘idea of stripping humanity down to its primeval natural origins—benevolent, harmless, and herbivo-rous’ (Stuart 2006, 375). Animal consumption is presented as violent and unnatural, and by abstaining from carnivorous practices, Frankenstein’s composite creature appears more humane than humanity. The theme that a frugal, ecologically balanced lifestyle equates to a peaceful one, is further explored in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man, where a world wracked by overconsumption becomes a wasteland of disease and ecological catastrophe.

The Influence of Shelley and his Contemporaries
Shelley’s eloquent advocacy for the ‘natural diet’ provoked many activists to continue to spread his message of moral and ecological wellbeing after his early death in 1822. American writers like Emerson and Thoreau, inspired by Shelley, helped to endorse the vegetarian diet throughout the mid-19th century, and were instrumental in creating the Vegetarian Society in 1847. In 1881, the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw ‘converted to vegetarianism after reading Percy Shelley’s The Revolt of Islam’ (Stuart 2006, 423), who in turn created many texts promoting animal welfare and sustainable living. Perhaps Shelley’s most profound descendant is Mohandas K. Gandhi, who ‘became a born-again vegetarian’ after encountering Shelley’s books in London and becoming inspired by his ‘call for non-violent radical vegetarian protest’ (Stuart 2006, 425). Because so many key contributors across the vegetarian movement were directly inspired by Shelley’s works, much of the rhetoric utilised in animal rights debate stems directly from his treatise. However, even though modern discourse owes a lot to the ecological dogma of the Romantic poets, with only 2-3% of the UK population estimated to be vegetarian or vegan, it seems that although their arguments might be valid, they still fail to be widely accepted.

References and texts consulted: