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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY AS A REVOLUTIONARY POET

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#### ABSTRACT

Percy Bysshe Shelley was the most revolutionary and non-conformist of the Romantic poets. His passionate search for personal love and social justice is shown in his poems – which are some of the greatest in the English language. He was an individualist and idealist who rejected the institutions of family, church, marriage and the Christian faith and rebelled against all forms of tyranny. Shelley's ideas were anarchic and he was considered dangerous by the conservative society of his time. Many of his poems address social and political issues. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the contribution of Shelley towards English literature. Shelley's life-story is wild, outrageous, shocking, revolutionary and unconventional. Shelley's poetry has two different moods. In one he is the revolutionary reformer, wanting to change the old order and to find universal happiness. In the second he is a great Nature lover, almost merging himself in the beauty of the world around him.

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## INTRODUCTION

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 into a prosperous aristocratic family. He was educated at Oxford where his political and philosophical readings led him to cowrite a dissertation, *The Necessity of Atheism*, for which the Oxford authorities expelled him. Shelley's father demanded a public retraction of the pamphlet, but Shelley refused and instead eloped to Scotland with the sixteen-years-old daughter of a coffee house proprietor. A major new study of Percy Shelley's intellectual life and poetic career, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* identifies Shelley's fascination with sublime natural phenomena as a key element in his understanding of the way ideas like 'nature' and 'imagination' informed the social and political structures of the Romantic period. Offering a genuinely fresh set of perspectives on Shelley's texts and contexts, Cian Duffy argues that Shelley's engagement with the British and French discourse on the sublime had a profound influence on his writing about political change in that age of revolutionary crisis. Examining Shelley's extensive use of sublime imagery and metaphor, Duffy offers not only a substantial reassessment of Shelley's work but also a significant re-appraisal of the role of the sublime in the cultural history of Britain during the Romantic period. He returned to Wales, where he tried to set up a commune of

"like spirits". During this period he wrote pamphlets promoting "free love" and condemning royalty, meat-eating and religion. In 1814 he moved to London, where he came under the influence of the philosopher William Godwin and fell in love with his daughter, Mary. The death of his grandfather solved Shelley's financial problems and allowed him and Mary to elope abroad. Having travelled around Europe, they settled in Geneva where, in Summer of 1816, they were joined by Lord Byron. Disillusioned with Britain, Shelley moved with his family to Italy. In 1822 he moved his family to Lerici. In August 1822 he drowned in the bay of La Spezia. His body was cremated on the beach at Viareggio in the presence of Byron and other friends.

Shelley lived during a period of unprecedented change. In almost every sphere of life – social, political, religious – long-held beliefs and opinions were being questioned and, in some cases, undermined. In science too, recent advances had called into question commonly-held assumptions about the origins of the universe and the place of man in the "divine order" of things. These changes are, to some extent, reflected in the work of the other younger Romantic poets among whom Shelley is usually grouped. Byron and Keats did respond to the political situation which prevailed in Europe during the first years of the nineteenth-century, and many of these changes in society are reflected in these poems; but Shelley is the only poet of the period who engages his audience directly in such

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debates and who holds firmly to the belief that poetry can actually transform the social order into something new and better. But why did Shelley feel so strongly that society needed to be changed at such a fundamental level? In order to understand this we need to know something about two momentous events which occurred in the last quarter of the previous century.

The first quotation, taken from *Dedication*, speaks of the poet's decision, made very early (at Eton, when he was a schoolboy of 12 or 13), to dedicate his life to the lasting struggle against all kinds of tyranny and oppression; the second, taken from *Alastor*, Shelley's first remarkable poetic achievement, is obviously a self-portrait. To the common reader Shelley, the high-minded idealist, is primarily known as the author of a number of magnificent longer and shorter lyrics with which he occupies a very high position in English poetry, although his reputation has never been fixed and secure. After a serious decline in the first half of the 20th century due to the hostility of the New Critics and especially the prominent critic T. S. Eliot's verdict that Shelley is a poet of adolescence by whom he "was intoxicated at the age of fifteen" and later found him almost "unreadable" (1933), the last decades of our century have witnessed a reconsideration and reinterpretation of Shelley's work in all its fecundity and variety. Even in 1956 Isabel Quigly writes that "Shelley lives on outside his verse, and continues to attract or repel, as he did when he was alive." Recent generations of critics and scholars have realized that the complexity of his thought and symbolism, the fluidity of his lines as well as the abstractedness of his ideas, together with his idealism and utopianism, deserve a better understanding which demands a close reading of Shelley's entire reading and writing. Thus, T.S.Eliot's verdict has become a thing of the past.

In his lifetime Shelley was savagely attacked, especially from conservative angles, for his unconventional life, for his radical political views and a passion for reform. As a republican and atheist he was an easy target for all reactionary heads. To those who knew him at second hand he was a "vile wretch", "a man weak in genius and character." Even the benevolent and warm-hearted Charles Lamb said once: "No one was ever the wiser or better for reading Shelley." Byron, who knew him better than anyone else, wrote to the publisher John Murray: "You were all brutally mistaken about Shelley, who was, without exception, the best and least selfish man I ever knew. I never knew anyone who was not a beast in comparison." Wordsworth, commenting on Shelley's art in handling various metrical and stanzaic patterns, recognized that "Shelley is one of the best artists of us all:

I mean in workmanship and style." Symptomatically, Wordsworth uses the word artist, not poet. Shelley himself was a Wordsworthian at the start, but was later repelled by the older poet's conservatism and religious orthodoxy. He grew disappointed and the disillusionment found its outlet first in the fine sonnet "To Wordsworth" and then in the bitter satire *Peter Bell the Third*. As a lover of nature he remained a Wordsworthian to the last, but his love inspired him to write a completely different kind of poetry. Unlike the other five Great Romantics, with the exception of Blake, with whom otherwise

he had a lot in common, Shelley lacked an audience; like the two other younger Romantics, Byron and Keats, he died young and abroad, after years of restless existence. Those who have closely examined both Shelley's work and life agree that in his personality Shelley was charming, very passionate, of a quick intelligence, moving always towards speculation and seeking overall patterns which could make sense of the particulars around him, an idealist but bitterly sensitive to the imperfections in human behaviour, outraged by cruelty and intolerance (A.D.F. Macrae). J.R. Watson, opening his chapter on Shelley (*English Poetry of The Romantic Period*, 1985) gives reasons which account for Shelley's poetry being elusive and difficult: "In the first place, it contains a very considerable amount of Shelley's voluminous reading - philosophical, scientific, mythological, religious, and political. Secondly, it frequently attempts to describe that which is beyond description - a depth beyond depth, a height beyond height, a timelessness beyond time, a boundless space, all the features of a universe which we can stretch to imagine but cannot satisfactorily find words to compass. Thirdly, it is a poetry which moves with great speed; its characteristic effects are not those of logic or fixed clarity, but of a changing sensibility confronting an ever-changing world."

These words are an answer to those readers and critics who found, or still find, Shelley a poet of feelings, intellectually and emotionally immature, and his imagery incoherent, yet admit, though reluctantly, that he excelled in "craftsmanship" and that his lyrics are beyond criticism. They, in fact, show a lack of response to the width and intensity of both Shelley's subject and style as well as the range of experience. Starting from his unworldliness they accuse him of ungrounded optimism and idealism, forgetting his passion for justice and human-heartedness which was with him throughout his life despite his ill health, domestic sorrow, public indifference and critical malignity. Unable, as they declare, to see Shelley's work from Shelley's life, which they find abhorrent (T.S. Eliot is one of them), what they cannot see is that Shelley was "very human in his passions, his errors, his failures, and his achievements" (Noyes). And what is more important, adds Noyes, he had "the poet's penetrative, many-sided mind and soaring imagination." Every reader of Shelley ought to bear in mind not only the facts of the poet's life but also that the Romantic age was a time of turmoil, political and social injustice and inequality, oppression and corruption, religious and political intolerance, and above all, poverty of the exploited masses. That was a time when the old ways of thought in religion, in morals, in behaviour and in art were being questioned and Shelley responded passionately, thinking of himself as "a Promethean light-bringer whose business was to destroy tyrannies and establish liberty." After *The Necessity of Atheism* his life was almost completely dominated by his passion to reform society.

Shelley was a voracious reader with a power to deal with abstract ideas and to relate his thoughts and feelings to the external world and events. His exploration of the interaction between the ideal and the material world made some Shelley scholars read his poems emphasising the influence of Plato and the Neoplatonists. Plato (428-347 B.C.), with his view that "the temporal world is a poor imitation of the real world of perfect eternal forms" and a belief in a "greater reality than that which is present to the senses" must have attracted Shelley. He must

have also been attracted to Bishop George Berkeley's (1685-1753) view that "the world is known to men as it is seen (or shaped) by their minds." Such a view represented a downright rejection of John Locke's (1632-1704) theory that the world through a man's senses impresses itself on the mind. If Locke was an influence when Shelley worked on *Queen Mab*, Berkeley led him to Plato. Recent studies, however, show that the influence of Plato is slight in comparison with that of David Hume (1711-1776), the Scottish philosopher who, with his skeptical arguments, exposed the false teachings of both Locke and Berkeley. The other two men, the French thinkers and writers, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Voltaire (1694-1778), the former with his claim that man is by nature good but is corrupted by civilisation, the latter with his indictment of hypocrisy, superstition and intolerance, must have occupied Shelley's thoughts, informing his own attitudes towards the social nature of man. Rousseau's elevation of the world of nature and spontaneous feelings was another element of his theory that appealed to Shelley as it did to other romantic poets. In the British radical political thinkers Tom Paine (1737-1809) and William Godwin (1756-1836), more than in anyone else, Shelley found a firm support for his revolutionary ideas to which he remained true to the last.

The American War of Independence (1774-81) had called into question not just the right of a British sovereign to rule the overseas colonies, but also the right of that sovereign to rule at all. Profound dissatisfaction with the rule of monarchies underlies both the work of Tom Paine (*The Rights of Man*) and William Godwin (*An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*) – radicals who espoused the cause of the American Revolutionaries and went on to become major influences in the thought that informs so much of Shelley's poetry. More significant than the loss of the American colonies, though, were the repercussions that followed the French Revolution of 1789 – an event which was to send shock-waves throughout the whole of Europe. Britain found itself at war with Revolutionary France and then with Napoleon Bonaparte who remained unchecked until his defeat at Waterloo in 1815. The French Revolution was so significant because it demonstrated the power of the masses and the weakness of the aristocracy in the face of social upheaval. This period of revolution coincided with the increasing industrialisation and urbanisation of British society. All the injustices of a divided society which had existed before industrialisation were suddenly thrown into sharp focus and the unrepresented masses were perceived as a threat by the ruling elite. Reform was seen as a dangerous option; repression the most expedient. Although born into the ruling classes himself, Shelley was quick to relinquish his birth-right and ally himself with the ordinary people with whom he identified and whose cause he wanted to champion. It is easy – and dangerous – to idealise Shelley's identification with the masses, and to do so would be to miss the point of his career as a poet. While he undoubtedly felt that practical measures needed to be taken in order to create a more just society, he also held to the conviction that individual beliefs had to be changed at a fundamental level before any significant transformation could begin. It is primarily at this level then, in an appeal to the dignity of the human spirit, that Shelley's poetry agitates. In this sense, it is truly revolutionary in that it seeks first to change the human heart, confident that changes in

human relations will follow. If Shelley's poetry looks forward idealistically to a time in the future when men and women will be able to live in a just society, it also concentrates on the events and issues of the time in which the poet lived. In his personal life, Shelley was an atheist, a vegetarian, and an advocate of free-love. More than with any other poet, details of Shelley's biography have been allowed to colour critical responses to his work. It seems to follow that if someone is attracted to Shelley as a personality then they are likely to be admirers of his work; conversely, those who find Shelley's lifestyle repellent are often the fiercest critics of his poetry. With this in mind, it is sometimes difficult to reach a balanced view. It is true that Shelley left behind him a trail of destruction: his personal relations were tainted by an unshakeable conviction that his views were always right, and many people who became close to him suffered as a result of that intimacy. And yet Shelley the poet was capable of expressing in memorable language ideas that were shocking at the time but which have since become part of our common beliefs about the basic right of the individual to freedom. Take, for instance, his stance on the equality of women. 'Can man be free if woman be a slave?' he asks in his long poem *The Revolt of Islam*, thereby expressing in one line the fundamental argument for equality of the sexes. Again and again in his poetry Shelley reinforces the same simple idea that all humans are equal and that forms of organised government and religion are means by which the stronger minority represses and controls the weaker masses.

Apart from the difficulties which arise when Shelley the individual is confused with Shelley the poet, we should also be aware of the way in which many of his poems have been given an interpretation which neutralises their political content and presents them in entirely different terms. A good example of this is perhaps Shelley's best-known poem, *Ode to the West Wind* which appears in all editions of Shelley's poems and in many anthologies of English poetry. Most approaches deal with it as a poem about the powers of Nature. And, at one level, the poem is about exactly that. It deals with the way in which the forces of nature are basically restorative; that after a period of death (winter) nature reverses the order of things and brings resurrection with the spring. A closer examination, however, shows that Shelley identifies the falling leaves – 'Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red' – with 'Pestilence-stricken multitudes' and the wind itself with an animating spirit which has the power to revive and restore, to stir up to action and to agitate. Later in the poem he suggests that the wind might act through him and become 'the trumpet of a prophecy' – an activating force closely associated with his powers as a poet. Far from being a poem about nature, *Ode to the West Wind* appears to argue the case for a special function for the poet and poetry in a time of social repression: the poet can speak for and articulate the grievances of the masses. It is at the very darkest of times, Shelley seems to suggest, that change takes place; that, in effect, things must get worse before they can possibly get better. That is why the poem ends with the conviction that 'If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?' In order to see more clearly the revolutionary influences at work behind Shelley's poetry, it is useful to examine three poems which were written in direct response to specific conditions which prevailed during the time at which

Shelley was writing. These poems – two sonnets and a ballad – are fairly representative of Shelley's approach, his political idealism, and the level of invective he directed towards the ruling classes in the British society of the early nineteenth-century. In the first, England in 1819, Shelley begins with a memorable line which immediately calls into question the right of a monarch, George III, to rule. Describing him as 'An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King' he goes on to indict his heirs as 'For Shelley, then, the ruling classes are not merely incapable of ruling, they are also using their privileges in order to live off the very society whose interests they are supposed to be protecting. The 'people' however, are depicted as being essentially helpless; unable to break the grip of this repressive regime. Shelley thinks of them in terms of an 'army'; that is, he agrees that the masses retain a certain potential in that by sheer force of numbers they might be able to overcome their oppressors; but he also perceives them to be leaderless and without the necessary spirit to bring about significant change. By the end of the poem Shelley has introduced the figure of a 'phantom' who might 'burst' upon the scene; a sort of messianic figure who will lead the masses to equality and liberty.

Found in most popular anthologies of British poetry, Shelley's technically innovative sonnet, *Ozymandias* also deals with the subject of tyrants and their fall. It begins with the famous line 'I met a traveller from an antique land' and goes on to relate how this speaker discovers the shattered remains of the statue of the great Egyptian pharaoh Ozymandias. It is significant to note that Napoleon Bonaparte had conducted an unsuccessful campaign in Egypt and Shelley may have this in mind as he explores the emptiness and vanity which lies behind autocratic rule. The statue of the pharaoh may have been destroyed and its parts dispersed throughout the desert but the plinth on which it stood remains. Shelley draws our attention to the inscription on the massive statue's base:

**'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings**

**Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.'**

The irony is obvious: while Ozymandias intends the mighty to observe the great city built around his statue, it is clear that all that remains is sand and broken stone. With this in mind, it is possible to interpret the despair of tyrants at the inevitability of their downfall. Once again, Shelley takes a traditional form and invests it with a unique vision. The language is vivid, precise, and evocative; the narrative tendency is very strong and conveys Shelley's ideas in a manner which appears immediate and accessible. Shelley is often – with some justification – criticised for being too abstract. This poem is a singular instance of the poet using concrete imagery and situations to convey his revolutionary message. Shelley's response to specific political events during his own lifetime is nowhere more evident than in his poem, *The Mask of Anarchy*. In 1819 the tensions in England had reached a crisis point. At a mass demonstration by working men and women in Manchester, troops were deployed to break up the crowd, many of whom were killed and injured. The events of that day have gone down in British history as the Peterloo Massacre. Shelley heard of the atrocity while in exile in Italy and

immediately responded to it in verse. While he deliberately adopts a style and tone that would appear familiar and accessible to the working class audience he is aiming at, the poem progresses with the logic of a nightmare. Shelley frames the poem as a dream or vision, one in which he meets a succession of the major politicians of the day which he held culpable for the massacre. He indicts the ruling order of kings, and priests and lawyers and suggests that the only way in which the masses can earn their freedom is by their own efforts. It is important to notice that Shelley does not at this point put forward any sort of armed uprising; rather, he encourages the downtrodden workers to 'Stand ye calm and resolute / Like a forest close and mute'. This appeal to passive resistance is typical of Shelley. He understands that violence is not the answer as it will only elicit a violent response. By withholding their labour, the workers will render impossible the system by which they are held as prisoners. He sees the masses rising 'like lions after slumber' and taking responsibility for their own destiny. 'Ye are many', he concludes, while 'they are few'. For readers of Shelley who think this advice impractical, the success of large-scale peace movements in the twentieth-century, particularly that instigated by Gandhi (himself an avid reader of Shelley)

### **Shelley as a Revolutionary Poet**

"For the Romantic poet, the idea of revolution has a special interest, and a special affinity. For Romanticism seeks to effect in poetry what revolution aspires to achieve in politics: innovation, transformation, defamiliarisation" (David Duff, p. 26) Revolution is a dominant spirit in almost all the romantic poets. Percy Bysshe Shelley, a Romantic poet, is also called rebel for his idea of revolution in his poetry. As the French Revolution dominated all politics in those years, unlike Wordsworth or Coleridge, Shelley never abandoned the ideals of the revolution, though he was appalled by the dictatorship of Napoleon. Shelley only experienced the revolution at second hand through the books of various writers and was influenced by Rousseau, William Godwin etc. When he looked back, all he could see was the flame of revolution still flickering in spite of the terror, war and disease. His long poem, *The Revolt of Islam*, written at the height of his powers, is clear on one matter above all else – that the ideas of progress, which inspired the revolution, will triumph once again.

In the "**Ode to The West Wind**" Shelley is seen as a rebel and he wants revolution. He desires a social change and the West Wind is to his symbol of change. This poem, written in iambic pentameter, begins with three stanzas describing the wind's effects upon earth, air and ocean. The last two stanzas are Shelley speaking directly to the wind, asking for its power, to lift him like a leaf, or a cloud and make him his companion in its wanderings. He asks the wind to take his thoughts and spread them all over the world so that the youth are awoken with his ideas. In the first stanza of this poem, Shelley says that the West Wind drives away the last sign of life in trees and also helps to rejuvenate the world by allowing the seeds to grow in the spring. In this way the West Wind acts as a destroyer and preserver. Shelley says, "Wild spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!" Actually the West Wind acts as a driving force for change and

rejuvenation in the human and natural world. And it is the symbol of revolution. Shelley begins his poem by addressing the Wild West Wind. He quickly introduces the theme of death and compares the dead leaves to ghosts. The imagery of "Pestilence-stricken multitudes" makes the reader aware that Shelley is addressing more than a pile of leaves. His claustrophobic mood becomes evident when he talks of the wintry bed and The wind blows through the jungle and produces music out to the dead leaves. Shelley requests it to create music out of his heart and to inspire him to write great poetry, which may create a revolution in the hearts of men. He wants the Wind to scatter his revolutionary message in the world, just as it scatters cries and sparks from a burning fire. His thoughts may not be as fiery as they once were, but they still have the power to inspire men. He tells the Wind to take message to sleeping world, that if winter comes, spring cannot be far behind. After bed days come good days. Here he says, "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

We also find Shelley's revolutionary zeal in ode "To A Skylark". According to Shelley, the bird, Skylark, that pours spontaneous melody from heaven and sours higher and higher can never be a bird. It is for the poet, a joyful spirit that begins its upward flight at sunrise and becomes invisible at evening like the stars of the sky that become invisible in day light. Moreover, it is compared with the beans of the moon whose presence is rather felt than seen. It's a heavenly bird and by singing it spreads its influence through the world.

### Shelley's Poetry and Ideas

Shelley was an English Romantic poet and philosopher. His passionate search for personal love and social justice is shown in his poems – which are some of the greatest in the English language. Most of his poetry shows his personal beliefs:

- Human love,
- Human reason,
- A belief that mankind is basically good and capable of getting better.

His lyric poems are superb in their beauty, grandeur, and mastery of language. As well as one of England's most lyrical poets, he is also valued for his wit, his satirical works, and his ideas as a social and political thinker

### His ideas about the Nature of Poetry

#### Shelley said

A poet is a nightingale, which sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own loneliness with sweet sounds. His listeners are hearing the melody of an unseen musician. They know they feel moved, and their hearts are softened – but they do not know what is causing this or why they feel that way.

### The Two Distinct Moods of Shelley's Poetry

The poetry of Shelley, like the man himself, divides itself into two distinct moods. In one he is the violent reformer, seeking the overthrow of conventional institutions and the

establishment of universal happiness. From this mood comes many of his longer poems and lyrical dramas, "Queen Mab" (1813), "Revolt of Islam" (1818), "The Cenci" (1819) "The Masque of Anarchy", "Hellas" (1812), and the most important of all, "Prometheus Unbound" (1819). These poems are often violent attacks against governments, priests, marriage, religion, even God as the Church portrays Him. All these works indicate Shelley's hope for a better world. In the second distinct mood, Shelley is forever searching, following a vague, beautiful vision, forever sad and forever unsatisfied, always pursuing an ideal, hoping for something better that is to come. He sees in Nature something inspiring and spiritual; flowers, trees, the sea, mountains and clouds are "real" and a part of the poet himself. This mood gives special meaning and beauty to his poems on nature. "Ode to the West Wind" (1819), "To a Skylark" (1820) and "The Cloud" are regarded as three of the most beautiful nature poems in English language.

In all his writing, Shelley believes that he can pave the way for a better society. Even in his shorter pieces the social ideal is the central one. Yes, Shelley is one of the greatest English nature poets, but he is also one of the greatest political writers. For example, "Ode to the West Wind" is, on the surface, a poem of nature, but in fact, it sings of the revolution that is to come. It prophesies the destruction of the old world and the coming of a new world.

### Conclusion

Shelley is truly one of the greatest poets of English Literature and undoubtedly the best of all the Romantic poets. It really is hard to believe that any poet who lived just 29 years could leave behind large a quantity of great poetry. As a lyric poet, Shelley is one of the supreme geniuses of English literature. He is certainly the most beloved of the Romantic poets. No English poet has ever possessed a lyric genius as pure as his. His early death was an enormous loss to English literature, for he was a man not only of the highest idealism, but also of enormous intellectual breadth. Shelley's poetry has two different moods. In one he is the revolutionary reformer, wanting to change the old order and to find universal happiness. In the second he is a great Nature lover, almost merging himself in the beauty of the world around him, and the author of some poems that are regarded the most beautiful nature poems in English language.

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