



P. B. SHELLEY AS A HUMANITARIAN IDEALIST, A GLORIOUS PROPHET AND AN INSPIRED SEER REVELING IN RICH USE OF SYMBOLS FOR EXPRESSION OF IDEAS AND MEANING : AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to show how P.B.Shelley was regarded as the most visionary of all English poets and his poetry was described as the fabric of a vision. “As a revolutionary and a lover and supporter of the French Revolution, he favoured and sung of the principles and things for which the French Revolution stood and wished so earnestly to change the social order of the world and that is why he hated and opposed slavery, tyranny, injustice and cruelty and cherished a world order based on fairness, justice, equality, liberty and fraternity.

Keywords : *visionary , idealist, humanist, revolutionary, change, slavery, tyranny, injustice, cruelty.*

INTRODUCTION

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) is regarded as the most visionary of all English poets and his poetry was described as the fabric of a vision. “As a revolutionary and a lover and supporter of the French Revolution, he favoured and sung of the principles and things for which the French Revolution stood and wished so earnestly to change the social order of the world and that is why he hated and opposed slavery, tyranny, injustice and cruelty and cherished a world order based on fairness, justice, equality, liberty and fraternity. His vision being a wishful thinking, he gives a dreamy and rosy picture of this vision in “Hellas”:

“The world’s great age begins a new,

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*The golden years return
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn.”*

There is no shadow of doubt that “Shelley is the patron saint of modern socialism. “Shelley renounced realism and thought that poetry would be more effective by talking of ideal perfection which can be attained by man in future. He was not only a rebel and a revolutionary but also a reformer and a prophet. In place of realism, he preferred idealism. As a visionary dreamer, he presented in his poetry idealistic pictures of a glorious and golden future for mankind. He did strongly believe in the regeneration of mankind and wanted to reshape the society of his time in accordance with the ideals of the French Revolution based on liberty, equality and fraternity, with the sound hope that tyrannical institutions of kinship, priesthood and injustice would soon disappear and the golden age of happiness and prosperity would follow. Like Byron, he came in a time of reaction. Unlike Byron, he remained in his inner spirit wholly unaffected by the reaction. He felt an enormous antagonism between good and evil, but the white flame of his devotion to what seemed to him a sacred cause was thereby only intensified. The preaching and propaganda aspect of the Revolution also finds its counterpart in Shelley. “All the illusions of the Revolution, many of them generous illusions, perfectibility, disregard of tradition, and inheritance, the contrast between a benevolent Nature and a selfish society – are to be found in full vigour in Shelley. Together with them is also to be found everything that was noble and admirable, everything that was of a constructive character in the Revolution; its faith in humanity, its longing for justice and its passion for brotherhood of man”. In *Prometheus Unbound* he voiced thus:

*To defy power which seems omnipotent;
To live and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like the glory of Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory.”*

In *Queen Mob*, he preaches the gospel of revolution and inspires people to rise against tyrants. In *Cynthna and Laon*, he presents heroic souls imbued with the ideals of liberty against bondage and tyranny. In *Hellas* too, he sings of the triumph of freedom.

The last decade of the 18th and the opening decade of the 19th century constitute an era of revolutionary ‘social social changes – economic, political, religious and literacy. During this period, the social developments ... decisively ensured the emergence of Britain as the first nation State of a new type, that form of industrial capitalist democracy which reached

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maturity about the end of the nineteenth century. The century opened in the midst of widespread disturbance caused by the French Revolution and the events which had followed. It has been well said: "At the beginning of every revolution men hope, for they think of all that mankind may gain in a new world: in its next phase, they fear, for they think of what mankind may lose". This was the case with the French Revolution. The elder writers of the period, with Wordsworth and Coleridge as conspicuous examples, hailed the new era with joy. Then, as the Revolution proceeded to unexpected developments, there came in turn disappointment, disillusion, dejection and despair, and notably in the case of Wordsworth, the rejection of youthful ideals and the soured adoption of the older reactionary faith. The younger writers, such as Leigh Hunt, Shelley, and Keats, still adhered to the Revolutionary doctrines. The conclusion of the long war brought inevitable misery giving rise to fiery resentment and fierce demands on the part of the people. Men like Shelley and Ebenezer Elliot called aloud for social justice.

The impressionable and sensitive nature of Shelley with his generous impulses, was pained and moved to indignation at the sight of misery and distress and un-freedom. In response to the passionate yearning of his heart, he naturally broke into poems of liberty. He was simply swept away by enthusiasm, but has no practicable schemes for the liberation of humanity. It might be admitted that he wrestled in spirit to win universal freedom for mankind and pined in longing for it. The inmost pathos of his poetry consists in nothing else than in it. He said of himself:

*A nerve o'er which do creep
The else unfelt oppressions of this earth.*

Shelley felt that sort of disgust which makes a man rave and curse under the attacks of some loathsome disease; if he laughs, it is the laugh of frenzy. He possessed a radiant faith in the possibility of perfection, which led him to unmeasured, unbalanced attacks on the institutions and prejudices surrounding him which seemed to him to be retarding the attainment thereof. The character of Shelley was a strange compound of the idealist and pessimist; of gentleness, purity, generosity, strong devotion on the one hand and a want of common sense of humour, and a very inadequate sense of duty and responsibility on the other hand. Egoism being the keynote of his personality, he possessed an extremely emotional and imaginative nature. His ideas came to him not from the world around him but from his own volitions of visions. His poetry is not emotion recollected in tranquility. It is fervent emotion outpoured in a gush. He has to his credit composition of such notable works as 1. *Queen Mab* (1813), 2. *Alastor* (1816), 3. *The Revolt of Islam* (1817), 4. *The Prometheus Unbound* (1818), 5. *The Cenci* (1819), 6. *Excellent Lyrics* (1822), 7. *The Masque of Anarchy* (1818), 8. *Epipsychidion* (1821), 9. *The Witch of Atlas* (1820), 10. *Hellas* (1822), Godwin, Plato and Rousseau were the major influences on the thought and mind of Shelley.

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Shelley was concerned with the problem of evil holding the universe in its grip. He constantly endeavoured to discover ways and means by which those evils could be eradicated and their place taken by the forces of goodness. It was Shelley's view that there was a continuous struggle between the forces of evil and goodness and often the evil achieved victory over good. He thought that evil was not an accident but it was a principle and its forces worked in human life as strongly as the forces of good. Often enough, the forces of evil gathered strength and overcame the forces of goodness. The realisation of this fact made the poet downcast and sad. His heart cried out in agony and he wrote:

*Rough wind, that meanest lout
Grief too sad for song
Wild wind, when sullen cloud
Knells all the night long;
Sad storm whose tears are vain,
Bare woods, whose branches strain,
Deep caves and dreary main,
Wail for the world's wrong.*

In *Queen Mab*, the poet is moved at the sight of human life overwhelmed by the forces of evil and the helplessness of man against his oppressors. The opposition of Prometheus and Jupiter represents the fundamental antithesis of good and evil, liberty and despotism, love and hate. Prometheus resists Jupiter and endures all torments, waiting for the hour of Jupiter's overthrow and of the triumph of good. Evil destroys itself by its own poison and good triumphs by its own inherent power of love. No poet realised more thoroughly and intensely the forceful influence of love for shaping human destiny. In the poetry of Shelley, the symbol of the evil occurs repeatedly. It is seemingly the poet's favourite symbol which he employs in poem after poem such as *Queen Mab*, *The Revolt of Islam* and *Prometheus Unbound*. In *Queen Mab*, the fairy declares:

*And it is yet permitted me, to rend
The veil of mortal frailty, that is spirit,
Clothed in its changeless purity, May know
How soonest to accomplish the great end
For which it hath its being and may taste
That peace, which in the end all life will share.*

Shelley was firmly convinced that the visible world is an imperfect image of the reality of the invisible world and that there is a thin partition that separates the two from each other. If the partition were torn asunder, men would see readily, and all suspicion, hatred and cruelty



would cease and peace would reign in the world. Thus, the regeneration of the world would be brought about by the tearing asunder of the partition. To express his idea, the symbol of the veil is used. The word 'symbolism' in its broad sense, means the imagery used by a poet to express his ideas. Shelley's imagery is symbolic to an unusual degree. In his essay on Shelley's symbolism, A.T. Strang says, "The exultation of Earth at her liberation in *Prometheus*, the grief of spring for lost *Adonais*, the charioting of the winged seeds in their dark wintry bed by the west wind and other re-awakening when her azure sister blows her clarion call over the dreaming earth – all of these are exquisite symbols of Shelley's faith" (P 39). These are the symbols of general nature with which Shelley's poetry is strewn and adorned. However, there is a special variety of symbols which Shelley uses to express certain definite ideas and images embodying his deepest conviction and faith. In his essay "The Abstractness of Shelley", Richard Harter Fogle points out that of all the elements of his poetic style, "Symbolism is perhaps the most essential" (P 39). A.C. Bradley pointed out in his essay, "Shelley's view of poetry" that "the light of hidden power" was one of Shelley's favourite metaphors. In *The Magic Plant*, Carl Grabo devoted considerable attention to Shelley's symbolism. Shelley's symbols are expressive of his search for Truth but a poetic truth imaginatively pursued. It is this spirit which evokes the deepest feelings of Shelley's spirit. His most characteristic imagery embodies an attempt to establish the relationship between the finite and the infinite.

Shelley saw the manifestation of something beyond any tangible object. He followed the platonic concept that the visible world is only a shadow of a higher world. In order to speak about that world, Shelley had to use symbols. The use of symbols has created a kind of vagueness in his poetry. The struggle between good and evil is symbolized by the serpent and the eagle. Serpent occurs again and again in Shelley's poems Jupiter is the symbol of all evil and tyrannical oppression and Prometheus represents noble forces of liberty and reason. The fall of Jupiter symbolizes the fall of evil. Poison, scorpion, the moon, the stream and boat are also Shelley's favourite symbols. Poison expresses spiritual evil and corruption. Scorpion stands for evil. The rise of the moon enables the poet of Alastor to see the Cavern in the cliffs of Caucasus into which his Shallop is swept by the current. In *Prometheus Unbound*, characters are not individual characters, they are symbols of Shelley's views. Jupiter is the symbol of all evil and oppression and Prometheus is the symbol of freedom and liberty and the noble forces in human nature. Poison represents in Shelley spiritual evil and corruption. He uses this symbol frequently. Scorpion is another image of evil. The moon symbolizes calm and hope.

To conclude, Shelley uses symbols to represent his revolutionary and mystical ideas. Through these concrete symbols, he tries to express his abstract ideas.



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