

## The rebellious spirit of romanticism as reflected within romantic aestheticism in Shelley's Poetry<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*The French Revolution (1789), fostering the thought of freedom and individuality, had an undeniable effect on the Romanticists. And poetry enabled most of them to express their sense of rebellion in an aesthetic manner. The Romantic poet Percy Byssche Shelley (1792-1822) was among the aspired supporters of the French Revolution in its initial stages. The aim of the study is to explore the rebellious nature of Romanticism which is very well reflected within Romantic aestheticism in Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1817), "Ode to the West Wind" (1819), and "To a Skylark" (1820). For this, the study will refer primarily to Shelley's own essay "A Defence of Poetry."*

**Keywords:** *The French Revolution, Romanticism, Percy Byssche Shelley, rebellion, aestheticism.*

### **1. Introduction**

It is commonly observed that the historical issues affect, either directly or indirectly, literature in many ways. It was the French and Industrial Revolutions that influenced the fundamental literary principles of Romantic poets; and especially the French Revolution (1789), which fostered the thought of freedom and individuality that had an undeniable effect on the Romanticists. Hazlitt (1934) states that the French Revolution emerging in France came along with "a new impulse [which] had been given to men's minds" (p. xvii). Secular and liberal conception of man sprang from the French Revolution. Thus, there was a shift from social man to individual man. Featuring in the initial phases of the Revolution, the democratic idealism also had an enormous impact upon the Romantic writers. Thereby, they reflected the language and experience of the ordinary people and their own imaginative worlds in poetry.

The poet seeks comfort and rebirth in nature, and it is beautiful not only because of itself, but also because the spirit of God is revealed in nature, which unites all created beings into a whole. Therefore, nature has a religious and spiritual significance for Romantic poets. Thus, their skepticism in the existing society made them return to nature, the past ages; the Middle Age and the Renaissance for rebirth. Emphasizing the French Revolution's prompting rebellious nature of the Romanticists, Chien (2005) argues: "Much as the French Revolution signaled an attempt to break with the old order and to establish a new and revitalized social system, Romanticism sought to free itself from the rules and standards of eighteen-century literature and to open up new areas of vision and expression" (p. 261). Thus, it is obvious that the changing approaches resulted in changes even in the language the Romanticists used in poetry. Poetry shifted from imitation to expression, as the mirror held up to the human nature was turned to the human heart. Poem became "the very image

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of life expressed in its eternal truth" (Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry" p. 794), and poets were regarded as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (802). The literature of the period arose "as it were from a new birth" (795) and poetry gave the sense of rebellion in an aesthetic manner by means of diction in it.

The Romantic writers were influential supporters of the French Revolution through their works, and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was one of them. "[G]rown up with violently revolutionary ideas, which contrasted with those of his fathers" (Gillie, 1972, p. 783), Shelley was a radical non-conformist in every aspect of his life and came from a conservative background. Following his experiences as a student in Eton and Oxford, he "saw the petty tyranny of schoolmasters and schoolmates as representative of man's general inhumanity to man, and dedicated his life to a war against injustice and oppression" (Abrams et al., p. 698). He attributed the evils in the world to "humanity's own moral failures and grounded the possibility of radical social reform on a reform of the moral and imaginative faculties through the redeeming power of love" (Abrams et al., p. 700). Therefore, he is not hopeless "in a redemption from present social ills"; for him "by keeping open the possibility of a better future, hope releases the imaginative and creative powers" (Abrams et al., p. 700). Thus, it can be claimed that his hope for a good world for human beings also fostered his imagination and creativity in his poetry.

## 2. Analyses of Shelley's "Ozymandias", "Ode to the West Wind" and "To a Skylark"

Shelley's 'Ozymandias' is inspired from "the largest statue in Egypt [which] had the inscription: 'I am Ozymandias, king of kings; if anyone wishes to know what I am and where I lie, let him surpass me in some of my exploits.' Ozymandias was the Greek name for Ramses II of Egypt, 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E." (qtd. in Abrams et al., p. 725). The speaker in the poem reports the things a traveller he met from an antique land tells about Ozymandias (line 1). The poem relies on a single metaphor. It is a ruined statue standing in a vast desert with its arrogant appearance and meaningful inscription. The statue of the king is a work of art that can make even the impressions on his face survive (lines 4-7). In other words, the traveller puts forward that the sculptor "read" (line 6) and reflected Ozymandias' totalitarian rule on the statue itself. Therefore, the speaker celebrates the power of the art. Hereby, Shelley reminds the reader of Shakespearean sonnets underlining the strength of art against the devastating power of time.

The statue's being shattered and ruined is noteworthy in coming up with paradox. Although intended to make the king survive in art, the artifact also seems to decay. This point endorses Cleanth Brooks' point in his essay "The Language of Paradox" (1972) that the language of poetry is the language of paradox, which is an "inevitable instrument" (p. 295) for the poet. For him, this results from the fact that poetry is the expression of emotions which contain contradictories within themselves. Furthermore, as a New Critic, Brooks' thoughts are in line with I. A. Richards who claims that there are no metaphors or similes that fit a poem from edge to edge, therefore, it is inevitable for the poet to use paradox to fill in the gaps in his poem. Considering these points, while portraying a powerful leader who wants to survive by means of the immortalizing power of the art, Shelley also falls into a paradox. The reason is that on one hand he celebrates the power of art and the ability of the artist who reflect every detail on the face of the king on his art, on the other hand, he describes a shattered and ruined statue. These contrast expressions make the reader question how one can observe every detail upon the statue, which is "shattered". Thus, his contradictions take the reader to the conclusion that even a work of art cannot survive the destructiveness of time.

In the poem, Ozymandias' proud of himself is suggested in his words: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/ Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" (lines 10-11). On the other hand, this once-great king's prideful boast is ironically disproved with the fact that his works have disappeared with his lost civilization, and everything has gone into nothingness with the indiscriminately destructive power of time. It is clear in the traveller's description of the shattered and largely non-existent remains of Ozymandias' statue in the lines: "Nothing beside [the shattered statue] remains: round the decay / Of that colossal wreck boundless and bare, / The lone and level sands stretch far away" (lines 12-14). It is very ironic that although the inscription on the statue survives thousands of years later, time has destroyed all the evidence of Ozymandias' kingdom. Rodenbeck (2004) claims that Shelley's point is the "transitory nature of all earthly power" (p. 129). Accordingly, Shelley's message is evident: all earthly status is doomed to die out, no matter how powerful one is. The ruins around the shattered statue prove that nothing lasts forever and all the boasts will be ironically disproved in the end. The poem is also claimed to reveal Shelley's hatred of absolute rule that can be sensed in the lines describing Ozymandias' arrogant and angry appearance, because he believes that the world would be peaceful and habitable "if tyranny, cruelty and the corruption of man by man through jealousy and the exercise of power are removed" (Evans, 1955, 56).

Shelley's another poem, "Ode to the West Wind," is an ode, "composed to praise a particular person or thing. The romantic poets admired odes and used it as avenue to voice out their minds' thoughts in form of a praise while incorporating their own surge of emotions" (Shawa, March 2015, p. 127), and in this ode, Shelley praises the West wind as a representation of creativity, which, he believes, will spread his visions among all humankind, as it drives leaves over the earth, clouds through the air, and waves on the seas. He asserts that the wind a special strength to protect the seeds from death by scattering the dead leaves away. Hence, for the poet, autumn refers to the retrieval of nature, as it helps to scatter the dead leaves for spring: "O wild west wind, thou breath of Autumn's being, / Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead, / Are driven like ghosts, from an enchanter fleeing" (lines 1-3).

Shelley uses the colors of autumn as a reference to death, which has destroyed the leaves and made them futile: "Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red, / Pestilence-stricken multitudes" (lines 4-5). As suggested in the lines, the idea of death is evoked. The aged poet wants poetic creativity to survive in his poems by spreading his ideas for humanity, because he asserts that a dramatic change is necessary for a peaceful and habitable world. He is also hopeful to embrace a new vision of life, just like the West Wind, which has a power of scattering the dead leaves and calls for spring, the revival of nature. Therefore, he desires the seeds in human minds to awake and reactivate them for a new life for humanity: "The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low, / Each like a corpse within its grave, until/ Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow" (lines 7-9). According to Al-Hamdani (January 2007), "[h]ere the poet uses the 'azure,' mainly because he considers azure or the blue colour of redemption, happiness and peace of the spirit" (p. 45). Then, in the poem, Shelley realizes that even when the wind is wild in scattering the dead leaves, it is a preserver of life at the same time, primarily because it protects the "winged seeds" from the destruction and death as he states the double nature of the wind: "Wild spirit, which are moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!" (lines 13-14). The poet also wants to accompany the West Wind and yearns for a harmony with it: "If I were a dead leaf, thou mightest bear;/ If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;/ A wave to pant beneath thy power and share" (lines 43-45). Shelley wants the west wind to rescue him from his cures, caused by the injustices in life and oppression of the authoritarians. Therefore, he asks for the west wind's help. Even when expressing his sufferings, he is very

aesthetic in his poem. His addressing the personified wind and the half-rhyme used at the end of the lines and repetitions of some words, like article 'a' and conjunction 'and' contribute the aestheticism in the poem:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud  
 I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!  
 A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
 One too like thee: timeless, and swift, and proud. (lines 53-56)

In the last part of the poem, the poet states his aspiration for becoming the West Wind's voice around the world: "Make me thy lyre, as the forest is:/ What if my leaves are falling like its own!/ The tumult of thy mighty harmonies" (57-59). The poet achieves making the reader sense the harmony the west wind creates in nature. One can imagine that when the wind blows in the forest, the trees seem as if they were talking among themselves. Likewise, he yearns to be inspired by the wind in his writings. At this point, Shelley's notion of poetry as the music of the soul is revealed with his comparing the voice of the poet to a lyre, whose "mighty harmonies," he believes, will awaken the humanbeings, because poetry is something divine for Shelley ("A Defence of Poetry" 798).

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone  
 Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, spirit force,  
 My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!  
 Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
 Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
 Scatter, as from an extinguished hearth  
 Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
 Be through my lips to unawakened earth. (lines 60-68)

It is clear from the lines above that the poet wants the wind to spark his mind oppressed by the authority, as it does to the dead leaves of autumn to quicken a new birth. He wants poetic creativity so that he can write his ideas people can learn about. He ends his beautiful, aesthetic, imaginative and emotional poem in an optimistic note: "The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (lines 69-70). With these lines, he reveals his concept of poet and a poet's mission. According to Shelley, poets can sense, from their familiarity with their own times, what is likely to happen and to be thought and felt in coming years. Therefore, their works are "[t]he trumpet of a prophecy" (Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," p. 802). Shelley regards them as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (p. 802). In other words, they help shape both the present and the future and affect the ways in which other people both think and act. Therefore, there is always hope for the change for the poet: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (line 70). Accordingly, the west wind in autumn is the forerunner of a cold and barren winter. Nevertheless, the optimistic poet points that spring always follows winter: a new beginning for the nature and its revival. It is so obvious that Shelley also uses powerful natural metaphors and symbols for the ultimate effect of aesthetic expression in his poetry. For instance, besides the west wind as a symbol of poetic creativity, the spring season in this poem is a representation of a kind of revival in human imagination and consciousness. That is to say, it refers to the impact of Shelley's art on the society. Thus, considering W. B. Yeats' "The Symbolism of Poetry" distinguishing emotional symbols, evoking emotions, from intellectual symbols, evoking ideas, it can be

claimed that Shelley's symbols are emotional ones and the products of high imagination and subjectivity whose roots he takes from the rebellious spirit of the French Revolution. He has a great talent to combine them in a harmony.

In his other poem "To a Skylark", Shelley ascends to the high level of aestheticism achieved by means of the harmony between the form and the content. He can manage even to reflect the feeling of the sublime in the poem, which demands a special talent. The stanzas of this long poem can be grouped into three parts. In the first part, the poet describes the bird as a "blithe spirit" (line 1) whose song is a product of "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" (line 5). It sings as it flies "like a cloud of fire" (line 8) in the sky. The poet is fascinated with the song of the bird. Although he cannot see it, he can sense that the sky is full of the bird's sweet voice. The bird's divine beauty becomes so integrated with the sky that it becomes invisible whenever it flies high up in the sky. It becomes united with Heaven. For the poet, the bird becomes a kind of "unbodied joy" (line 15) whose "shrill delight" (line 20) evokes happiness and peace in the listener.

In the middle part of the poem, Shelley compares the bird to many things in different stanzas of the poem to describe the beauty of the bird's song. He asserts that even "rainbow clouds" cannot rain as brightly as the shower of melody that pours from the bird's song (lines 33-35). The comparison of the melody in the bird's song with the rain of rainbow clouds is a part of aestheticism in the poem. The bird is resembled to "a poet hidden / In the light of thought," (lines 36-37) and it can present the universe "sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not" (line 40). It is likened to "a lonely maiden" in a palace, who sings to cure her soul suffering from her love (lines 41-45). For the poet, the bird is like "a golden glow-worm", illuminating its around even when it is unseen. (lines 46-50). It is like a rose, which is not seen, but whose powerful scent is felt, when the wind blows, and even the bees are fainted with "too much sweet" (lines 51-55). The bird's melody goes over "all that ever was, / Joyous and clear and fresh" (lines 59-60). The poet does not find all these comparisons as sufficient, because for him none of them can express the delight the poet feels in his soul while listening to the bird. However, they provide a strong sense of aestheticism for the poem.

Shelley also states that pain and languor "never came near" (line 79) the skylark. For instance, he notes that although it loves, it has never known "love's sad satiety" (line 80). Also, the bird must know "things more true and deep" about death (line 83) than people can imagine; or else, the poet questions, "how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?" (line 85). Furthermore, the thin line between happiness and sadness in mortals' lives find an aesthetic expression in the poet's work. For him, people who are doomed to die "pine for what is not" (line 87); even their laughter is noted to be "fraught" with "some pain" (line 89); their "sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought" (line 90). According to Shelley, tragedy is the source of "the melancholy which is inseparable from the sweetest melody" (2000, p. 797). That is to say, the melancholic sound in the poem makes it pleasurable. However, Shelley says, people can "scorn / Hate and pride and fear" (lines 91-92) and they are born with the ability to weep. Nevertheless, he is not sure whether all feelings could ever approximate the joy the poet senses about the skylark.

In the last part, Shelley expresses his aspiration for sharing the secret of the "unbridled joy" the skylark feels, because he believes that this sense is not a similar one felt by people. The skylark is a special source of inspiration for the poet, because he notes that he has never heard from any other people or things such a "a flood of rapture so divine" (line 65). The poet wishes it to teach him its sweet thoughts, just like he wants the west wind to make its lyre in the poem. It can be

claimed that the poet underlines that freedom is not only something physical, moreover, something with "half the gladness / That thy brain must know" (lines 101-102). He notes that the seed of life; imagination and consciousness of humanbeings can get out of the state of inactivity and take all humankind to a peaceful life in a harmony. Thus, the poet believes that by the help of the skylark, he will make his readers' lives better and Shelley implies that this indicates the power of poetry, which takes its force from the power of nature.

### 3. Results and conclusion

Shelley is a peculiar poet who emphasized the connection between beauty and goodness, believing in the power of art to improve society. Considering other Romantic poets, it can be observed that Byron has a controversial rebelliousness in his works, while Keats believes in aesthetics in poetry for just its own sake. However, as a social reformer, Shelley has a constructive rebelliousness in his works, because, after all, he believes in the curative effect of poetry. Therefore, his poetry is a product of optimism, which he hopes will influence his readers in all terms. Therefore, he states: "Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb" (2000, p. 792).

In "Ozymandias", which is fourteen-line sonnet, metered in iambic pentameter, Shelley achieves not only reflecting his rebellious nature by giving his message about all totalitarian regimes, he also achieves this by making a king's statute speak out metaphorically and depicting his ironic situation paradoxically in an aesthetic manner in his poem. Furthermore, considering Hulme's approach to Romanticism he finds inferior to Classicism, as a Romantic poet, Shelley reveals in his "To the West Wind" and "To a Skylark" that man is a "well, a reservoir full of possibilities" (1972, p. 95), thus beauty equals infiniteness and man's good nature. He believes that when the restrictions upon man's nature are removed, the infinite possibilities will be set free and his progress and creativity will be infinite. That is why he demands poetic creativity from the west wind and the skylark, which reveal the spirit of God and are the existences of the sublime. With these thoughts, he does not seem to be in line with Hulme who believes, as a classicist, man is a limited creature who needs organization and inhibitions (1972, p. 94).

Shelley's "observation has become keen and more delicate; his technique of using metaphors and rhythms, of choosing words and verses has reached a peak" in "Ode to a Skylark" after "Ode to the West Wind" (Bhattacharjee, March 2014, p. 211). He uses the west wind as a source of aestheticism through metaphors selected from the nature, and the skylark also appears to be his greater natural metaphor for aesthetics in his poetry. The skylark is, in fact, the embodiment of the values favoured by the Romantic poet: high imagination, eternal happiness, and pointer of peace and progress. Thus, it is associated with idealism and the society Shelley dreams of: free from all kinds of corruption. Shelley regards poetry as "the light of life; the source of whatever of beautiful, or generous, or true..." (2000, p. 799) and the poet as the communicator of this truth. Thus, from the perspective of Yeats (2007) who considers symbols as "the most perfect form", as they are the "subtle and outside pure sound" (p. 115), Shelley can also be regarded as a mastermind with his emotional symbols providing aestheticism in the expression of the Romantic poet's rebellious ideas.

In conclusion, it can be claimed that Shelley is the embodiment of Romanticism. He also achieves aestheticism, the source of which is imagination and subjectivity resulting from his rebellious spirit of revolution in his Romantic poems, speaking out his personal ideas and emotions.

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