

# Shelley the poet and a quintessential humanist

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## Abstract

Percy Bysshe Shelley's ever-spark thought seems to have made out of him an ideal rebel, reformer and revolutionist against inequality, tyranny and oppression whether it's individual or institutional. He possibly appears to be molded with delicate sensitivity, all-embracing humanity, deep imagination, fulsome freedom, sound views and penetrating insight. He has advocated the rights of the rightless or those who have been de-righted. Shelley looks to have decided to set his mind and dedicate his thundering voice and swordy pen to correct and relieve declined humanity. The poet's revolutionized spirit perhaps watered and rained a cosmopolitan support of freedom, democracy and philanthropy as well as to peacefully topple tyrants and oppressors everywhere else. Shelley has non-violently been looking for the day on which all people will embody humanity in the full sense of the word to live in peace and appreciate bounty of co-existence. As a matter of fact, Shelley who probably found in women all source of goodness- enhances and embodies intact values that mold and model a person free of mental, psychological and bodily constraints. This paper may definitely re-construct the poet not only as a right activist but also expose his philosophy of peaceful rebelling and vengeance abandonment.

*Keywords: P.B. Shelley, thundering voice, swordy pen, philanthropy*

## Introduction

It is well-known that Shelley comes of an aristocratic family. Although he adored beauty of nature and all its belongings, he filled up with sorrows for the poor conditions of workers and their families who groan under heavy weight of silent suffering. He may have used to search, accompany, sit and listen to untold stories. This can be evidenced in his affirmation "I was a favorite among all our servants," (Stoddard 12). He has most likely realized how those people have been misjudged socially, economically, politically and how they have been deprived from their basic rights. Donald H.Reiman and James Bieri suggest in their essay Shelley and the British Isles that he "vows to help the poor and to support love, non-violence, and social reform" (17). Since then Shelley seems to have decided to set his mind and dedicate his thundering voice

and swordy pen to correct and relieve declined humanity and enhances all reforming. Richard Henry Stoddard points out that “He had a passion for reforming the world, and the world never wants to be reformed” (xiv). Out of direct didacticism he has probably created awareness and an argumentative voice of de-voiced people in a beautiful composition. Shelley tirelessly not only creates awareness but tries to lift minds up. According to E.J. Trelawny “Whilst men tried to force him down to their level, he toiled to draw their minds upwards. His words were, ‘I always go on until I am stopped, and I never am stopped’ (71). In a word, it can be said that his human vision burnishes spirituality and sparks imagination which are a crucial means of all good behavior. The poet’s revolutionary ideas probably grew from childhood.

He revolted against all oppression and injustice whether it’s committed by individuals, institutions or regimes. At Eton he exposes his discontent of “something unfavorable to a French teacher, who was accused of being fond of those pupils, who could supply her with fruit and cakes” (5). He also buzzed against Christianity and Christians when he was at Oxford. He wrote to a publisher to get him “an Hebrew essay, demonstrating that the Christian religion is false,” (Stoddard 49). The poet looks to reform and re-correct not only corrupted-educators’ behavior and fanatic religious mentalities but also rebels against social and political schemes. It can be proposed that he has been intellectually inspired by revolutionaries of Orient, Greek, Spanish, French and English. In some works he praised Spanish, Irish, American, French and Naples revolutionaries.

### **Objective**

Present paper intends to study humanitarian aspect of Shelley’s oeuvre

- a. His egalitarian outlook towards moral organization of humanity in the "Kingdom of God"
- b. The attitude towards living a meaningful life full of virtues

### **Shelley the humanist**

“when the power of imparting joy Is equal to the will, the human soul Requires no other heaven.”

— Percy Bysshe Shelley, Queen Mab

Shelley is considered one of the greatest of English poets. His writing had both great sensitivity and power. Though his life was short, he made a tremendous impact on the thinking of his time. He was a great humanitarian, and wanted dignity and freedom for everyone. His ideas ran directly counter to those of his time, when a few were held to be rightfully in authority and the many

were supposed to do what they were told without question. Shelley would have none of this. His Song to the Men of England expresses this dramatically:

“Men of England, heirs of glory,/Heroes of unwritten story.../Rise like lions after slumber/In unconquerable number./Shake your chains to earth like dew/Which in sleep had fallen on you.

Ye are many, they are few.”

One of his poems, Ozymandias, especially emphasises the futility of dictators who set themselves up as supremely important, only to have all their vain show wiped out by the passage of time. Shelley imagines a traveller in the desert who happens upon the remains of a huge statue, now broken, forgotten, half buried in the sand. Among the remains, the traveller reads an inscription:

“ ‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!’/Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Nora Crook reveals that he supported “liberal revolution in Spain” (72) and DannayaC.Wright states that “Percy’s Letter to the Irish people encouraged Irish independence and Catholic emancipation”. Susan J. Wolfson refers to Shelley’s disturbance (even before he learned of Peterloo) about England’s ‘very disturbed state’ (344). Furthermore, in his poem ‘Men of England, heirs of Glory’ he seems to refresh, incite and direct English people to peacefully revolt and uprising. He alluded at the Glorious Revolution of 1688, these words are of an activist: “Rise like Lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number / Shake your chains to Earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you— Ye are many— they are few” (Lines 151-5) (qtd. in Hutchinson 156). According to Nigel Leask “Shelley problematically admits that the European values which are to free [Indians] are also those which enslave them’ (p. 119)” (qtd. in Garrett 107). It can be said that Shelley revolutionized spirit perhaps watered and then rained a cosmopolitan support of freedom, democracy and philanthropy as well as to topple tyrants and oppressors everywhere else. At the same time Shelley appears to have been disheartened by the bloody sequences of revolutions. He seems overwhelmingly attracted by French Revolution, though he sorrowfully dispirited by its bloody consequences which ended in revenge and vengeance. The ideal revolution that he desires and instructs is apparently a non-violent and bloodless. He clearly mentions in his poem The Revolt of Islam “*avenge misdeed \ On the misdoer \ doth but Misery feed \ With her own broken heart!*”(Lines 1813-4)(qtd. in Hutchinson

40). Michael Scrivener remarks that “nonviolent resistance is an essential part of Shelley’s political writing” (175). Here Shelley possibly returned to the Islamic conquests to embody the principle of amnesty and nonvengeance as embodied in Prophet Mohammed’s saying on the day of victory on tyrants and oppressors in Makkah after they have been defeated “Go! You are all free!” (Shokatfard Web) since revenge and vengeance will put both parties in the same boat.

Martin Garrett clearly mentions that “Tyrants are enslaved by their evil, slaves are tyrants if they simply return that evil” (195). Shelley affirms “All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil’ (II.iv.110)” (qtd. in Garrett 195-6). The poet clearly verses that “to exchange Blood for blood—and wrong for wrong— Do not thus when ye are strong” (Lines 193-6) (qtd. in Hutchinson 156). This may definitely re-construct Shelley not only as a right activist but also exposes his philosophy of peaceful rebelling and giving up revenge in pre-, peri- and post-revolutions. Shelley’s vision of non-violence has been projected in some more successful revolutions over the world. His perceptions may have positively been absorbed and inspired a lot of great leaders of revolutionary movements like “Henry David Thoreau, Mohandas Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. [Halberstam 1998] and Mairead Maguire” (Peterson Web). Therefore, Shelley’s nonviolence ideology appears to enhance coexistence among all beings and prepare the ground to successful and mature revolutions. Similarly, Scrivener quotes that Shelley has finished one of his pamphlets with “a call to universal solidarity and toleration—‘ when the Mahometan, the Jew, the Christian, the Deist, and the Atheist, will live together in our community, equally sharing the benefits which arise from its association, and united in the bonds of charity and brotherly love’ (Murray: Prose, 73)” (170). Consequently Shelley seems to have been non-violently looking for the day when all people will live in peace, harmony and appreciate bounty of co-existence.

Once again Shelley appears as an ameliorated and rightactivist persona. He defends the rights of all marginalized groups or unheard voices; rights of being free, rights of women and even rights of animals. For instance, one day he was walking with his friend and found a young boy riding a bony ass with “disproportionate load of fagots, and he was belaboring its lean ribs. he sprang forward, and was about to interpose with energetic and indignant vehemence.” but for his friend “with much difficulty persuaded him to allow [him] to be the advocate of the dumb animal” (37-8). Furthermore; Shelley appears to have contributed to eradicate the world from slavery and servitude. He defines slavery in *A Philosophical View of Reform* in 1820 edited by T.W Rolleston as “a system of insecurity of property, and of person, of prostration of conscience and



understanding, it is famine heaped upon the greater number and contumely heaped upon all” (Web). Shelley also writes clearly against the act of slavery either slavery of mind (as it can be called menticide) or that of body. Since the latter may lead to destroy mental potentialities, individualism and enslave man until he becomes a yes-man of non-identified personality in a vicious world. He denounces fettering even over poets’ minds; ‘gratuitous fetters on their own imaginations’ (qtd. in Hutchinson 22) because freedom-depriving can result a selfcontempt, fierce, offence or blasphemies; “while human tongues Tremble to speak, they did rage horribly, Breathing in self-contempt fierce blasphemies” (Lines 281-3) (11). He verses in Hymn to The intellectual beauty:

*I vow'd that I would dedicate my powers  
To thee and thine: have I not kept the vow?*

.....

Unlink'd with hope that thou wouldst free This world from its dark slavery” (Lines 60-70) (qtd. in Hutchinson 256).

Shelley presumes that all fatal or psychological diseases are rooted in slavery. The poet dictates “That Want and Plague and Fear from slavery flow...” (4384(64). He again verses “O Slavery! thou frost of the world prime” (Line 676)(qtd. in Hutchinson 215).

Slavery to Shelley is possibly not only restricted to mind or body. It can be psychologically fallen upon all even noble men who lose their freedom of speech, opinion, political, social, economic or spiritual liberties. He narrates in The Daemon of the World “Was man a nobler being; slavery / Had crushed him to his country's bloodstained dust” (Lines 171-2) (403). He considers slavery not only as an ironic curtain but as a whip of iron which turned earth into a miserable and an ugly place. Moreover, the poet states in his ‘Falsehood and vice’ that “Where Slavery wields her scourge of iron / Red with mankind's unheeded gore /.../ Vice and Falsehood took their stand / High raised above the unhappy land” (406). The poet looks to embody the concept of brotherhood or fraternity instead of slavery; his verses and emphasizes this on the tongue of Cythna -the heroine in The Revolt of Islam that “we all are brethren” (Line 1812) (qtd. in Hutchinson 40). As a matter of fact, Shelley looks to erect and enhance all values that mold and model a free man of all mental, psychological and bodily slavery. The poet defends not only the rights of women but also seems to have found within all source of goodness. He conceives ladies as an embodiment of virtue, benevolence, compassion, and sympathy.

It is worth mentioning that he was shaped by feminine culture and Milieu since childhood onwards. In his early age he kept companion of his four sisters: Elizabeth, Mary, Hellen, and Margaret together with his mother. After that he assembled his wife Harriet, her sister Eliza Westbrook and their daughter Ianthe. Later he accompanied his wife-Marry and her half-sister Claire together with their daughters as well as Elizabeth Hitchener, Comelia, Maria, etc. For more clarification one may return to Nora Crook's on Shelley and Women. It is worth noticing that while people usually prefer to travel individually, he still moves and travels across mountains, seas, and rivers usually with a group of relative females without any complaining or nagging of burdens upon his shoulders. Even in his poems he portrays women as a spring of revolt, social reform, unconditioned love and spirituality as versed in "The grace and gentleness from whence they came" (Line 1286) and Cythna also induces men to "Be free! and even here, Swear to be firm till death!"(3674-5).

### **Poet and his egalitarian pursuit**

The poet also foresees future of women as in "the rule of men was over now / And hence, the subject world to woman's will must bow" (Lines 3847-8)(qtd. in Hutchinson 83,55-6). Teddi Lynn Chichester points out that "Shelley fervently embraced the feminine, both as a general social and spiritual 'purifying' force and as a personal ideal— even, in fact, a cherished self-image" (136). In addition to that the poet, Mary Shelley and her father may be regarded as pioneers in feminism since they seem to have shared identical viewpoints. Shelley once declared that "Every one who knows me must know that the partner of my life (P92) (qtd. in Burns 84). Shelley simultaneously advocated the equality and liberty of women. In his long poem The Revolt of Islam he raises a rhetorical question that "Can man be free if woman be a slave?" (Line 1045). The answer to this rhetorical question is common-sensely affirmative and emphatic 'no, he cannot'. On one hand, Nathaniel Brown, following Kenneth Neill Cameron considers Shelley as a 'proto-feminist' who opposes 'the period's sexist norms' and an 'erotic psychology necessitating equality between the sexes' (Crook 70-1). On the other hand, Barbara Gelpi strongly resists this view. She states that "I most emphatically do not subscribe to the view that Shelley was a feminist" (Gelpi viii). Anna Frijstein puts it generally that "Besides being a great poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley was a fighter for the rights of those who he saw being treated unjustly" (31).

Nora Crook re-argues that Shelley "*had imagined a future in which women and men were free, equal, fearless friends and lovers*" (70). The poet obviously verses "*Let all be free and equal!*"

(Line 3343) (qtd. in Hutchinson 54). By and large, Shelley seems -without a full dedicative spirit- devoted much of his potentialities, imagination, poetry and prose to regain the full rights for those whom can be considered as rightless or de-righted. Shelley defends even the rights of non-humans. His vegetarianism has raised its own hypotheses, reasons, and justifications. He seems not only to prevent animals abusing but also to prevent its bloodshed. He possibly believed in its rights to live and enjoy life, afraid of acquiring its violence instincts and animalizing behavior or avoiding transferring diseases between human beings and animals. Shelley has composed four pamphlets on this subject; *A Vindication of a Natural Diet* (1813), *A Refutation of Deism* (1814, the note in *Queen Mab*, and *On the Vegetable System of Diet*, which were published posthumously in 1929 (Wikipedia).

Marilyn Gaull and Joseph Ritson look on physical effects as there 'is no disease, bodily or mental, which adoption of vegetable diet' (Murray: Prose, 83) (qtd. in Gaull 583) while ItsukiKitani broadens its spectrum in stating that "Meat-eating is represented as one of the causes of the social inequality. to Shelley the practice of vegetarianism enhances the power of sensibility in a psycho-physiological sense, as well as increasing sympathy among all living things on earth"(X). Additionally, Smith and Davy state that "Shelley was a strong advocate of social justice for the 'lower classes'. He witnessed many of the same mistreatments occurring in the domestication and slaughtering of animals, and he became a fighter for the rights of all living creatures that he saw being treated unjustly" (Students' Academy 74). Some critics consider the reason of Shelley's vegetarianism was influenced by old books or writings.

Davis John states that "Shelley was a classics scholar and had probably read the original texts in ancient Greek and Latin suggesting that Pythagoras had been lacto-vegetarian" (Web). It appears that Shelley's vegetarianism either influenced or was praised by a number of eminent figures like Bernand Shaw and Mahatma Gandhi. In 1886 George Bernard Shaw became secretary of the Shelley Society in London, and used his first meeting to announce: "***I am, like Shelley, an atheist, a socialist, and a vegetarian.***" (Davis Web). Moreover, Onno Oerlemans in Shelley's Ideal Body: Vegetarianism and Nature exposes that "a change in diet forces us consciously to recognize the violence we blithely participate in," (548). Willy-nilly Shelley looks to have had his certain and definite reasons behind his vegetarianism in which attracting the attention to violence being committed can be regarded as one of these main reasons.

## Conclusion

Shelley is probably a restless cosmopolitan poet with milk of humanity. He portrays and projects freedom and philanthropy. He yearns for a society which is governed by equality, fraternity and justice. The poet appears to have abhorred and despised all violent and bloody means. He advocates the rights of revolutionists, women, vegetarians, animals, slaves, poets, sages, politicians and even monarchs and queens. He wants politicians, sages and monarchs to be just and avail justice to people as well as they should not be extra-judicially executed or killed when they are being toppled down as a ventilation of people's anger. Shelley appears as an ameliorer and activist in all social, political, ecological, cultural, theological and spiritual aspects.

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