

Shelley's Philosophy Of Life

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Abstract: Percy Bysshe Shelley's philosophy of life is indirectly reflected through the various themes of his poems. He has been regarded as the most pessimistic English poet of the time. However, his pessimism seems to be limited for his own fate. To Shelley's mind the West Wind appears as the destroyer of the old order and the preserver of the new. In 'Ode To Skylark' Shelley pointed out that Skylark is not a bird but a spirit which pours rich melodies of spontaneous music in the sky. Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples was written in the mood of despair and frustration. Here the poet has given expression to his deep pessimism. In the poem, 'Invocation' the poet says that the spirit of Delight now visits him rarely. In 'Ozymandias' Shelley reveals the vanity of human greatness and the failure of all attempts to immortalize human grandeur. 'A Lament' is a short lyric giving expression to a feeling of deep melancholy. 'Ode to Liberty' traces the progress of civilization from the origin to the present. Shelley was against tyrants, monarchs and dictators. He believed in democracy and republic—which ensured equality, liberty and fraternity. 'Adonais' is Shelley's elegy written on the death of John Keats who died at Rome, aged twenty-five due to tuberculosis. Shelley's Adonais has been widely acclaimed as one of the greatest English elegies. Godwin and Plato were two dominant influences on Shelley's thought and poetry. Shelley's philosophy of life has been reflected throughout his major poems. The present research paper focuses on Shelley's philosophy of life. It also highlights background of his family, his lyrical themes – optimism and pessimism, influence of Plato and Godwin, and his four views of minds relating to internal and external forces.

Keywords: Shelley, pessimistic, frustrated, optimistic, idealism, disillusionment, prophet.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's philosophy of life is indirectly reflected through the various themes of his poems. He has been regarded as the most pessimistic English poet of the time. However, his pessimism seems to be limited for his own fate. It is because of his pessimism he is known to be the singer of sorrow and sufferings in his life. His poems deal with his hopes and aspirations. Though most pessimistic, he has been often hopeful and optimistic for the golden age of mankind. He yearned for the unattainable, as a result, he was frustrated and unhappy throughout his life. An early inspiration to Shelley's thoughts was William Godwin. The impression of Godwin's writing upon Shelley extended beyond his high school years. Shelley accepted enthusiastically Godwin's promotion of free love instead of the cursed institution of marriage. "Shelley's own family did not understand him from the beginning. Shelley had expected an inheritance from his father, but upon Shelley's expulsion from Oxford, his father disinherited him. Shelley's mother discouraged his reading of books as well as she felt that the reading added to his

madness." He believed in free love and endeavored to put his theory of free love into practice. He propagated the necessity of Atheism for the all-round development of mankind. He believed that this world is a play or scene of good and evil. A time may definitely come when the evil would be overthrown and good would rule the world. He believed that corrupt government officials and the priests in the churches manipulated the poor people. According to Shelley old fashioned conventions, outdated customs, useless traditions and meaningless institutions were holding the common people in the chains as if the poor were their slaves. He was confident about a time may come when the evils and slavery would be overthrown by the efforts of suffering humanity itself. To him, love and not force would become basis of human relations. All would be equal and free. Truth, love, justice, would rule the world. This optimism we may experience in his Ode to the West Wind.

To Shelley's mind the West Wind appears as the destroyer of the old order and the preserver of the new. The

West Wind becomes a symbol of change or mutability, which destroys yet recreates all things, while the leaves and seeds symbolize for him all things, material and spiritual, that are ruled by change. The West Wind is a symbol of Shelley's own personality. As a boy he possessed the same qualities which the West Wind possessed. He was, like West Wind, tameless, swift, proud, wild, uncontrollable and free. Thus, there is an affinity between the West Wind and the poet. This affinity encourages the poet to appeal to the West Wind for help, so that the West Wind is not only a symbol of his temperament and personality but also a symbol of relief to him in the state of distress. He looks upon the West Wind as a Savior. The West Wind is regarded as a symbol of the powerful influences and forces that will bring about the Golden Age of mankind. The poet expresses the faith that "If winter comes, spring cannot be far behind." This is the prophecy of the Golden Age of mankind.

"Shelley's visionary poetry, therefore, bothers readers of very different points of view. The orthodox are apt to find it offensively independent, while unbeliever find it excessively religious. Agnostics may like Mont Blanc, for example, but resist Intellectual Beauty. In fact, these poems contain values which both believer and unbeliever claim to admire, and we can all learn from so powerful a theological imagination."² The concept of 'Hymn To Intellectual Beauty' is derived from platonic philosophy. Shelley was greatly influenced by Plato who believed that the supreme power in this world was the Spirit of Beauty. Shelley conceives of Intellectual Beauty as an unseen and mysterious power visiting this universe with an "inconstant wing". When Intellectual Beauty departs, this world becomes a "dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate". This glorification of Intellectual Beauty clearly exhibits that Intellectual Beauty is Shelley's substitute for God. The attributes that are shown in this poem to be the attributes of Intellectual Beauty. This poem shows Shelley's mystical philosophy. Shelley was an ardent lover of freedom and had a fierce hatred of slavery and tyranny. Here in 'Lines Written Among The Euganean Hills' he speaks in terms of strong disapproval of Austrian dictatorship over the cities of Venice and Padua. Although it is a sad poem, the feeling of optimism runs through this poem. This is a fundamentally optimistic poem. "There are green isles in the wide sea of Misery; there are compensations for the agonies which human beings must endure. They consists in the beauties of Nature, of poetry, of thoughts of liberty, and of dreams centring in some healing paradise of the writer and those he loves, where 'the love which heals all strife' will encircle them 'with its old mild brotherhood,' so that soon every sprite beneath the moon would repent its envy vain, and make the earth grow young again. In short, the lines are of a piece with many other visionary poems from Shelley's pen."

In 'Ode To Skylark' Shelley pointed out that Skylark is not a bird but a spirit which pours rich melodies of spontaneous music in the sky. Human beings yearn for the impossible. There is a touch of sorrow in their merriest laughter. Their sweetest songs are songs of sadness. But even if human life were not so ugly or sorrowful, human beings would never experience that intense joy which belongs to the Skylark. Shelley contrasts the sorrow and suffering of mankind with the unspeakable joy of the bird. There is an

intensity of feeling throughout this poem. The poet's heart overflows with emotions. The note of longing and yearning is found in this poem. The life of human beings is full of disappointments and frustrations. Human beings have desires, aspirations and longings which remain unfulfilled. The sweetest songs of human beings are those that are full of sorrow and unhappiness. The songs of the Skylark, on the contrary, are an expressions of pure joy.

Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples was written in the mood of despair and frustration. Here the poet has given expression to his deep pessimism. It may be pointed out that, at the time Shelley wrote this poem, he had not only separated from his first wife but also lost the custody of his children by her. He had lost the good will of friends and relatives. As he sits on the sea-shore, he contrasts everyone else's happiness with his own despair. There is not the ray of hope in his life. He would like to die weeping. This is how he expresses his sense of frustration:

Alas! I have nor hope nor health
Nor peace within nor calm around
Nor that content surpassing wealth
The sage in meditation found,
And walked with inward glory crowned –
Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure.

In the poem, 'Invocation' the poet says that the spirit of Delight now visits him rarely. Ever since the spirit of delight became indifferent to him, he has been feeling sick, weak and weary. The poet also loves love. But love is inconstant and does not stay with a human being forever. The poet loves the spirit of delight. He, therefore, appeals to it to come and make him happy again: "O come! Make once more my heart thy home!" In 'Ozymandias' Shelley reveals the vanity of human greatness and the failure of all attempts to immortalize human grandeur. Ozymandias was a great Egyptian Emperor whose life-like statue was made to immortalize him but now the statue lies broken and disfigured and it is a barren desert all around the statue. There is a touch of melancholy in this poem because it makes us reflect over the vanity of human wishes and the failure of all our efforts to keep our memory alive forever. 'A Lament' is a short lyric giving expression to a feeling of deep melancholy. According to the poet there is no joy left in this world. All joy seems to have departed from the world. It is an expression of Shelley's habitual mood of gloom and sadness, although in many other poems, Shelley, while lamenting the existence of misfortune and evil in the world, strikes a hopeful note about the future, which is not the case here. It is a bitter poem of real despair.

'Ode to Liberty' traces the progress of civilization from the origin to the present. Shelley was against tyrants, monarchs and dictators. He believed in democracy and republic—which ensured equality, liberty and fraternity. Shelley's song thus makes a fleeting record of events which come to his mind; he was a poet with a philosophical bent of mind, and not a historians. According to him Man is the supreme creature but like all beasts, insects and worms he was a savage and violated the mother earth. There were frequent wars. The earth was a sort of hell. There was no liberty. Men were still savages and the stronger ones perpetrated cruelty on the weaker. "In fact Shelley was hostile both in kingship and priestly powers. Man as a supreme creature had a latent power

within, he has only to awaken his soul and it will bring him, what he has been craving for—Liberty. On the note of hope, the song ends but the swan – image is suggestive of pessimism. But if we look to the poems like ‘West Wind’ we shall understand Shelley’s philosophy, ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind?’ Thus bad times will change to better. That is the poet’s hope and expectation.”

‘Adonais’ is Shelley’s elegy written on the death of John Keats who died at Rome, aged twenty-five due to tuberculosis. Shelley’s Adonais has been widely acclaimed as one of the greatest English elegies. It is optimistic but its optimism is operative within the limits set by the situation. The situation is the death of a poet who was gifted poet. The poem is concerned with the death of a gifted spirit who dies before his gifts can be fully exercised. Shelley was not materialist, and no longer believer in the extinction of the spiritual element by death. On one occasion he said, “I hope, but my hopes are not unmixed with fear for what will befall this inestimable spirit when we appear to die.” On another occasion he remarked, “I am content to see no farther into futurity than Plato and Bacon. My mind is tranquil; I have no fears and some hopes. In our present gross material state our faculties are clouded; when death removes our clay coverings, the mystery will be solved.” Nevertheless, he did not believe in the immortality of the human soul. He wrote: “We know nothing; we have no evidence; we cannot express our inmost thoughts; they are incomprehensible even to ourselves.” He often believed in the midst of all perplexities, was the absolute and imperishable existence of the universal as perceived by us in love, beauty, and delight. The conclusion of ‘The Sensitive Plant’ expresses the hope upon this riddle:

For love, and beauty, and delight,
There is no death nor change; their might
Exceeds our organs, which endure
No light, being themselves obscure.

Godwin and Plato were two dominant influences on Shelley’s thought and poetry. Godwin believed that man is capable of continual moral improvement, and that character and intelligence are molded by environment rather than heredity. He condemned wealth worship, disapproved of the institution of government in the hands of rich, opposed religious tyranny, and criticized the law as an institution of the most pernicious tendency. He even opposed the marriage laws and customs of his days and advocated ‘free love.’ The other great intellectual influence in Shelley’s life was Platonism. “While Godwinian ideas are apparent in Prometheus Unbound, the concept of this drama transcends Godwinism. For those concepts Shelley turned to Plato. In fact, Shelley intertwines Godwinian and Platonic ideas in this play without any friction. The moral and political backgrounds are provided by Godwinian, but it is through platonic spectacles that Shelley looks at earthly objects when they are purged of their impurities, and then he treats them as eternal platonic forms.”

Shelley explored the four views of the mind’s relationship to outer and inner forces. The first was a materialistic necessitarianism, a concept of inevitability of progress. The second was psychological determination, concerned with the idea of aspiration, the striving of the imperfect man towards self-realization. The third was the stress upon the necessity for idealistic human leadership and the way towards the moral

condition which ought to obtain in human society. The last was the real key–concept which is necessary to the clear vision, the discovery of the law, and the assumption of moral leadership is the realization of the need for spiritual catharsis. Simply, man has to develop into self- realization as well as moral realization. This revolutionary idealism brought him in conflict with the society.

Shelley’s philosophy of life has been reflected throughout his major poems. Ode to the West Wind–West Wind becomes a symbol of change or mutability which destroys and recreates all things. It is a symbol of powerful influences and forces of Nature that will bring about the Golden Age of mankind. The poet expresses the faith that if winter comes, spring cannot be far behind. This is the prophecy of the future Golden Age. We prominently find here Shelley’s optimism for mankind. His mystical philosophy may be seen in his ‘Hymn To Intellectual Beauty.’ The attributes that are shown in this poem to be the attributes of Intellectual Beauty. ‘Lines Written Among The Euganean Hills’ is basically a sad poem, however, the feeling of optimism runs through the poem as the poet appeals to make the earth grow young again. It is a visionary poem carrying optimism for the future age. Ode To Skylark – is a contrast between the human beings and the bird. The note of longing and yearning is found as the life of man is full of frustration and disappointments. We have our aspirations and desires unfulfilled; on the contrary, the bird is singing a song of pure joy. ‘The poet, here, is optimistic as he is yearning for the sweet golden age.

Stanzas Written In Dejection is fundamentally pessimistic poem written in frustrated mood. He was separated from his wife and lost the custody of his children. He had lost the goodwill of friends and relatives. So he expressed his sense of despair and frustration. ‘Invocation’ is a melancholic poem where the poet complains that the spirit of delight now visits him rarely. That is why he has been feeling sick, weak, and frustrated. The poet hope fully appeals to Delight to come and make him happy again. Here we find poet’s optimism ‘Ozymandias’ has a touch of melancholy. It’s a failure of an efforts to immortalize human grandeur. ‘A Lament’ reveals poet’s habitual mood of gloom and sadness. There is no joy left in this world. All joys left the world. It is a basically bitter poem of real despair. ‘Ode To Liberty’ describes the progress of civilization from the beginning to the present day. Shelley was against tyrants, monarchs, and dictators. He believed in democracy – which ensured liberty, equality and brotherhood. It is a note of hope and expectations. ‘Adonais’ is Shelley’s elegy on the death of John Keats. The poem is concerned with the death of gifted poet who died before his gifts can be fully exercised. It is a pessimistic poem carrying silver linings of optimism.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it may be concluded that Shelley has been regarded as the most pessimistic poet of his time. However, his pessimism seems to be limited for his own fate. It is because of his pessimism he is known to be the singer of sorrow and sufferings. Though most pessimistic, he has been often hopeful and optimistic for the golden age of mankind.

He yearned for the unattainable and as a result, he was frustrated and unhappy throughout his life. His belief in the immortality of the soul is also optimistic note. His pessimism is often overruled by such cries of optimism: "If winter comes can spring be far behind?" It was this revolutionary idealism that brought him in conflict with society. Society took revenge upon him for his revolt against tradition and the result was the disillusionment which finds expression in his lyrics cries of pain. Shelley may be pessimistic about his own fate, but he is optimistic about the fate of mankind. So, he may rightly be called the poet of hope and a prophet of regeneration.

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