

Percy Bysshe Shelley: Voice of Protest and Revolution

Ajiet Ravikant Jachak

Bar. Sheshrao Wankhede Mahavidyalaya,
Mohpa, District Nagpur.

Abstract:

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," said Percy Bysshe Shelley nearly 175 years ago in his "Defence of Poetry". In the years since, many poets have taken that role to heart, right up to the present day. They've been rabble-rousers and protesters, revolutionaries and yes, sometimes, lawmakers. Poets have commented on the events of the day, giving voice to the downtrodden, immortalized rebels, and campaigned for social change. Shelley's fame rests largely upon his poetry, and his contribution to the English poetic canon, but he was also a polemicist, playwright and radical activist. Shelley's place is not only established as a major poet but also as a notable figure in the history of English radicalism: a revolutionary writer and activist who contributed to radical literature. Shelley sought to link specific movements against injustice and oppression, especially when they actively involved the poor and oppressed. Here, an attempt has been made to study two of his famous revolutionary poems, *The Masque of Anarchy* and *Song to the Men of England*.

Key words: Protest, revolution, mask, masque, tormented, oppression, workforce, labour, etc.

Poetry is the perfect venue for social protest no matter the subject. Shelley's life and ideas offer insight into the early development of socialism in his country. His ideas were a bridge between the generation of the French Revolution and, later, the Utopian Socialists, Chartists and early Marxists. Shelley's most politically engaged

writings expressed great social themes and a yearning for a better world, characterized by economic, social and sexual equality, with emotional force as well as political clarity. Much of his more overtly political verse has been deployed as rhetorical weaponry in working-class and progressive struggles from the Chartists, via the suffragettes and striking garment workers, through to the modern anti-war movement, even surfacing in the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Shelley's life, writing and politics are all bound together; they retain relevance as part of a radical, anti-capitalist tradition of mobilizing from below to reshape the world.

"The Masque of Anarchy"

"The Masque of Anarchy", a ballad of ninety-one stanzas, was inspired by the "Peterloo Massacre" in Manchester, England. On August 16, 1819, several thousand people gathered in St. Peter's Fields to hear the orator Henry Hunt speak in favour of reform in the English government. The assembly was broken up violently by militia and cavalry, who attempted to arrest Hunt. At least ten people were killed and hundreds injured.

The first stanza tells how news of the massacre led the sleeping Percy Bysshe Shelley "To walk in the visions of Poesy"; the images he envisions within his poetic imagination are essentially a reenactment of "Peterloo," with a happy ending. The first twenty stanzas offer a hideous parade in which the sins of government hide behind the likenesses of individual politicians of the

day. The poem's title is therefore a pun both on "mask," to conceal one's identity, and on "masque," a dramatic form of entertainment based on an allegorical theme. Murder "had a mask like Castlereagh," Robert Stewart Castlereagh, the Foreign Secretary who often introduced unpopular repressive measures in Parliament. Fraud bears the mask of Lord Chancellor John Scott Eldon, the judge who took two of Shelley's children away from him. Hypocrisy bears the likeness of Lord Sidmouth (Henry Addington), Home Secretary in the Tory Government. Other horrible beings follow, "All disguised, . . . / Like Bishops, lawyers, peers, and spies."

Last in the procession is Anarchy himself, a symbol for the English government. He claims: "I am God, and King, and Law!" Anarchy's "white horse" is "splashed with blood," reminiscent of the Death that rode a pale horse in Revelation. He is followed by "hired murderers," loyal bloodthirsty soldiers whom Shelley associates with those who took part in the killings at "Peterloo."

The macabre masquerade spells doom for the oppressed. Thus, Hope is described as a "maniac maid" resembling "Despair." She rushes by the procession, proclaims her "Misery, oh, Misery!" and lies on the ground before Anarchy, resigned to a dismal fate. Then an ambiguous "Shape" emerges, causing Anarchy to flee and to trample his followers to death. This entity brings with it "A sense awakening and yet tender" that brings the people hope. A mysterious voice is heard, like the cry of the "indignant Earth," nature itself.

The impassioned speech made by this voice takes up the final stanzas of the poem. The speech is a cry from freedom, urging the oppressed to "Rise like Lions . . ." and to "Shake your chains to earth like dew." The first part of the speech paints a poignant picture of the dismal plight of the working class caused by

despotism. Next the concept of freedom is discussed. To the common laborer, freedom means simply the food and shelter that are denied under tyranny. Freedom is synonymous with justice, wisdom, peace, and love. In the name of freedom, the oppressed from all across the country are urged to unite in a great "Assembly" to demand reform. Shelley suggests a nonviolent struggle: "Stand ye calm and resolute." The great potential within the united numbers of the oppressed is expressed in the final words of the speech: "Ye are many-they are few."

"Song to the Men of England"

Shelley employs his pen to speak specifically to the workers of England in this classic. Again, his anger is felt in every line and it is clear that he is tormented by the oppression he sees of the middle class.

"Song to the Men of England" is written simply. It was designed to appeal to the less educated of England's society- the workers, the drones, the people who fed the wealth of the tyrants.

The eight stanzas of the poem are of four lines each and follow a rhythmic AABB song-like format. In the second stanza Shelley tries to wake up the workers to the plight they may not see:

Wherefore feed and clothe and save
 From the cradle to the grave
 Those ungrateful drones who would
 Drain your sweat-nay, drink your blood?

By the sixth stanza Shelley is calling the people to rise up much like the French did in the revolution a few decades earlier:

Sow seed-but let no tyrant reap:
 Find wealth-let no imposter heap:
 Weave robes-let not the idle wear:
 Forge arms-in your defence to bear.

His message to the people was one of rebellion and uprising, to throw off the chains of labour and reap some of the fruits of their labours.

P. B. Shelley lived during the Industrial Revolution, which was a time of change and innovation. However, the workforce was still needed a great deal. They did most of the work, and yet received little. Shelley uses imagery in the first five stanzas to illustrate this crucial point. He even went so far as to call the higher classes "ungrateful drones", which is an extended metaphor for a male bee that does nothing except mating. He even went so far as to label the workforce the "bees of England", which signifies a lot because bees work nonstop, and basically work until they die.

Shelley also uses many connotations to illustrate his point, illustrating his point with metaphors and extended metaphors and imagery. The diction that he uses to show the people how deprived the people have become is strong, going so far as to call the upper class "tyrants". Among their toils are "weapon, chains, and scourge". Although the first two might be somewhat commonplace, whips are not. It was the Industrial Revolution, which was past the stage for whips and other instruments that were used on slaves. This powerful image conveys a sense of dominion by the upper class over the working class, because scourges were used to restore order among slaves.

Shelley was not shy in his approach when addressing the general public, and most definitely did not hide his criticism. His writing included satire and sarcasm, two literary devices that are not positive in any sense. One example of this is in the first four lines where Shelley addresses the upper class as "lords" and "tyrants", mocking them and insulting them at the same time. His portrayal of the upper class as tyrants and drones is a paradox, because although tyrants and drones don't do anything,

they still are an essential part of the society that they exist in. Tyrants keep order, albeit an enforced and cruel one, and drone bees are the key for reproduction as all other bees are female. Shelley also questions why the working class would work so hard to make ends meet when everything they do is for the benefit of the aristocracy. This is clearly shown when he says, "That these stingless drones may spoil / The forced produce of your toil?" Arguing that if the people rise up against the aristocracy they will have all the power, Shelley sarcastically calls the "drones" stingless, or in other words, powerless.

Shelley had a bold and clear message: Don't let the aristocracy oppress you any longer. This message was boldly pronounced, using a variety of literary devices such as imagery, connotations, satire, and sarcasm. Telling them to take the efforts of their sweat and blood and keep it for themselves, he begged the working class to do something. He begged them to take what was rightfully theirs.

Shelley polemicized and campaigned for parliamentary reform - at a time when very few had the vote - and for a free press, rights to assembly and protest, and civil liberties. These rights and reforms were all viewed as a means to an end: they could enable working people to shift the balance of wealth and power in society. He emphasised what Marx would later term self-emancipation, people taking action for themselves through collective resistance, not relying on well-meaning middle-class reformers. This was at a time when workers' strikes were an increasingly important strategy for the early trade-union movement; an era of Luddite destruction of machinery and large demonstrations for democracy. His thoughts on violence and its relationship to popular movements were complex, but in essence he believed a small amount of revolutionary force could be justified in opposition to the large-scale, systematic violence of an exploitative class

society.

Shelley was also an early champion of sexual liberation in a deeply patriarchal, hypocritical and restrictive society both at an ideological level and as a commitment woven into his own life and relationships. He was a proponent of religious toleration against the Anglican establishment, espousing atheism but also sensitive to the need for defending religious minorities irrespective of whether he agreed with their beliefs. He was a steadfast opponent of British colonialism in Ireland; the section on this is insightful about Shelley's attempts at political agitation, soberly assessing the problems and limitations as well as celebrating his activist commitment. He supported revolutionary uprisings and national liberation movements abroad, especially in later years after he left England.

The poetry, of course, is well worth reading in its own right; Shelley is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished of Romantic poets. He was famously one of a loose grouping of second-generation Romantic poets which also included Byron and Keats among others. They followed in the wake of earlier Romantics like Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge - poets who had been inspired by the French Revolution but whose youthful radicalism had

long since cooled by the time Shelley and his contemporaries came of age.

Shelley influenced a range of literary and political figures. He was cited as an inspiration by later writers including Robert Browning, Edgar Allen Poe and Thomas Hardy. He was subsequently admired by twentieth-century cultural and intellectual figures of the European left such as Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno.

Shelley also made his mark on the early socialists. Marx described him as 'essentially a revolutionist', remarking that he 'would always have been one of the advanced guards of socialism'. Frederick Engels, speaking to Eleanor Marx in the 1880s, recalled how 'we all knew Shelley by heart then', referring to the 1840s. At that time "Queen Mab", one of Shelley's major poems, was sometimes called 'the Chartists' Bible'. Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling gave a lecture on Shelley's socialism in 1888, nearly seventy years after his death. Shelley remains the most loved and widely read brave heart till date.

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