UNIT 9: P. B. SHELLY: LIFE AND WORKS

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- identify Percy Bysshe Shelley as one of the prominent English Romantic poets
- identify Shelly's revolutionary spirit and assess its implications in the context of English Romanticism
- assess the importance of Shelly's literary aesthetics

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Percy Bysshe Shelley was one of the most radical and also the most romantic of the English Romantic poets. Born to an upper class family, he was expelled from Oxford University for publishing a tract *The Necessity of Atheism*. The conservative English society, unable to tolerate his radicalism, forced him to leave England permanently in 1818.His poetic genius is clearly explicit in his lyrics like "Alaster", "To a Skylark", "Adonais", "The Cloud", "Dejection near Naples" and in verse dramas like *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*. As a critic, Shelley, in his *A Defence of Poetry,* claimed for poets the status of 'the unacknowledged legislators' of mankind.

9.3 P. B. SHELLY: THE POET

From an early age, Shelley showed an inclination towards radicalism and unconventionality and this one characteristic of Shelly as a poet gets reflected in almost all his poems. Like his own life, Shelley's poetry can be divided into two distinct moods. While in the longer poems, he gives vent to his passion for reform, in the shorter ones, he laments the hardships into which he is forced into. In his longer poems like *Queen Mab*, *Revolt of Islam*, *Hellas* and *Witch of Atlas*, he presents himself as the violent reformer. A dreamer of unrealisable dreams, Shelley, in his life as well as in poetry, always protests against religion, kingship, marriage and other conventional institutions.

9.3.1 His Life

Shelley was born in Field Place, near Horsham, Sussex, in 1792. He descended from noble and old families of influence. From childhood, he lived in a world of fancy, so real that certain imaginary dragons and headless creatures of the neighbouring wood kept him and his sisters in a state of fearful expectancy. From an early age, he developed a liking for the classics and did not accept the ordinary processes of learning. Shelley's first public school, kept by a hard-headed Scotch master with its floggings and its general brutality, seemed to him like a combination of hell and prison. When he entered the famous preparatory school at Eton, he was by then fed up with the existing institution and he promptly organised a rebellion against the brutal fagging system. All his friends called him as "mad Shelley". After his Eton experiences, Shelley found causes for rebellion in all existing forms of human society and he finally left school "to war among mankind," as he tells of himself in the *Revolt of Islam.*



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The next phase of Shelly's academic life begins with the University of Oxford. The subsequent influence of Hume's philosophy prompted him to publish a pamphlet called "The Necessity of

Atheism". It was such a controversial piece that it led to his expulsion from the University in 1811.Soon thereafter, his involvement and his elopement with Harriet Westbrook, a school girl who was attracted by his revolutionary doctrines, caused a permanent break with his family. Subsequently, the duo started wandering about England, Ireland and Wales, and Shelley's father disinherited him because of this ill-considered marriage. But, unfortunately, the pair soon got separated. By the beginning of 1812, Shelly met William Godwin, and this was followed by Shelley's marriage Mary Godwin, the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1816, Shelley travelled to Europe with his wife and thereupon developed an association with Lord Byron. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" dates from this period as does Mary's novel *Frankenstein*. His return to England was marked by the association with the group surrounding Leigh Hunt, who then was the editor of the radical newspaper *The Examiner*. That group consisted of John Keats and William Hazlitt. Shelley's long poem, *The Revolt of Islam* dates from this period. In 1818, Shelley left England and went to Italy. After wandering over Italy for some time, he finally settled in Pisa where his best poetry was written along with the company of Byron, Hunt and Trelawney. *Prometheus Unbound* was written in Rome in 1819. Between 1819 and 1820, Shelley went to Florence, and it is there that he completed both *Prometheus Unbound* and "Ode to the West Wind."

Throughout his life, Shelley was hostile to English Social institutions. But subsequently, in his later life, he came to realise the error of his rebellion. In 1822, when he was only thirty years of age, he was drowned while sailing in a small boat off the Italian coast. One finds that in all Shelly's works– epic, narrative and lyric alike– his devotion to liberty and his whole-hearted belief in love are the primary themes.

The poem "Ode to the West Wind" is one of the greatest and most powerful odes with remarkable structural excellence in English literature. This unit has helped you to discuss how Shelley's exquisite and beautiful thoughts are expressed through effective images. Through this ode, the poet expects a bright future to follow the bleak

present. It is his earnest desire to see humankind liberated from the deadening effect of authority. This notion distinguishes Shelly from the other Romantic poets. This poem reveals Shelley's own ideas about the changes which he wanted to make upon the world and humanity. Shelley's style abounds in personification and metaphors. The West Wind marks the end of summer and the beginning of the rainy season. In the wind, Shelly comes to discover a symbol for his own emotional pattern and his revolutionary zeal filled him with a passion for reforming the world.

9.3.2 His Works

Shelley was a reformer as well as a poet. Arthur Crompton Rickett has said the following words in favour of P. B. Shelly: "Little interested in the past, mindful only of the present, when it jarred on his social idealism his eyes are fixed intensely on the future. To renovate the world, to bring about Utopia, that is his constant aim, and for this reason we may regard Shelley as emphatically the poet of eager, sensitive youth of the visionary and reformer. In his earlier years, Godwin was the figure who most readily impressed his mobile imagination… In later life Wordsworth's influence is more clearly discernible. But most potent influence came from Greek literature." Such an analysis of Shelly's role as a poet helps us to understand the different aspects of Shelly's poetry.



LET US KNOW

A revolution to Shelley was much more than a political upheaval; it was a spiritual awakening, the beginning of a new life. On the other hand, Love, for Shelley, was a transcendental force kindling all things into beauty and no poet felt more deeply the dynamic influence of love in moulding human destiny. But critics are of the view that the dreamlike quality of Shelley's verse is a defect rather than a merit. The beauty of the visible world strikes his prismatic imagination and is dissolved into rainbow colours. Arnold called Shelley an 'ineffectual angel beating in void his luminous wings in vain.'

Besides lyrical dramas, Shelley became famous as someone who wrote longer poems, lyrics, odes, and sonnets. The poems like *Queen Mab*, *Alaster*, (or The Spirit of Solitude), *The Revolt of Islam*", *Epipsychidion* and *The Triumph of Life* constitute the bulk of his longer poems. "Adonais", written on the death of Keats, is perhaps his only elegy. Written in 1821, "Adonais" is a noble and eloquent elegy, the finest of his non-lyrical pieces. As in "Adonais", he celebrates his love and admiration of a brother poet, so in *Epipsychidion* he voices his affection for certain feminine influences that have entered his life. *Hellas* (1822) is inspired by the Greek Revolution, to which Byron gave his life. While his *Prometheus Unbound* reflects the superb lyrical invention of the poet as well as his intense humanitarianism.

His lyrics and odes include the names of some of his famous poems like: "Stanzas written in Dejection near Naples", "Ode to the West Wind", "The Cloud", "Ode to a Skylark" and so on. The more popular sonnets of Shelly are" Ozymandias of Egypt" and "England in 1819". In his lyrics like "The Cloud" and "The Ode to the West Wind", we confront a logical development of ideas that blends perfectly with the exquisite music, making it a thing of thought and beauty all compact. The cloud becomes the part of a nature myth of flawless beauty. The complete identification of the poet with his subject, the superb rush of music, the crystalline clearness of the picture, not for a moment marred by over-profusion of metaphor, as we can find in the poem, "The Skylark", are some of the distinctive qualities of Shelly's poetry.



LET US KNOW

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follow the bleak present. It is his earnest desire to see mankind liberated from the deadening effect of authority. This notion distinguishes Shelly from the other Romantic poets. This poem reveals Shelley's own ideas about the changes which he wanted to make upon the world and humanity. Shelley's style abounds in personification and metaphors. The West Wind marks the end of summer and the beginning of the rainy season. In the wind, Shelly comes to discover a symbol for his own emotional pattern and his revolutionary zeal filled him with a passion for reforming the world.

Critics would also like to argue that one of Shelley's earliest works *Queen Mab* (1813) is individual enough in its outcry against the unspiritual forces that weigh down in expression and, but it is crude in expression and is obviously written under the influence of Robert Southey's oriental outlooks. In the next poem "Alaster" (1816), Shelley found his true greatness as a poet. Written under the inspiration of congenial companionship and of the glories of Alpine scenes, we find ourselves bathed in that atmosphere of luminous beauty and ethereal music which is so peculiarly Shelleyan. The aspiring youth in the poem is the poet himself on his quest for life. It is the revolt of the imagination against the limitations of human life. Following this poem, and spiritually akin to it, is the fine "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1816) and the glowing tribute to "Mont Blanc" (1816).

However, many would like to argue that Shelley is a lyricist rather than a narrative artist. According to Swinburne, "his thoughts, words, deeds all sang together." Shelley, as J. A. Symonds pointed out, is "the loftiest and the most spontaneous singer of our language."Detested by men, Shelley often sought the company of nature. In the first place, he loves to transform aspects of nature into dream shapes of his own, as the skylark into 'a cloud of fire', 'a high–born maiden in a palace tower', 'a glow-worm golden'. Shelley prays to nature for help when he falls 'upon the thorns of life.' Finally, nature for him, as it is to Wordsworth, interfused with a universal spirit, which bursts into beauty.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why was Shelly expelled from Oxford University?

Q 2: What is Shelly's idea of a Revolution?

Q 3: How does Shelly conceive the idea of nature in his poetry?

Q 4: What, according to you, is the idea of imagination and creativity in the context of the poem "Ode to the West Wind"?

Shelley's essay "A Defence of Poetry" is a reply to the charges made against poetry by Thomas Love Peacock in "The Four Ages of poetry". Here, Shelley espouses his views about poetry. The Defence shows very clearly and most distinctly the influence of Plato, Sidney'*s Apology*, and Coleridge's *Biographia Literatia* on him. Shelley conceived imagination to be the most essential part of the creative process. He believed that Reason and Imagination are the two mental processes– Reason being the power of external analysis, and Imagination being the power of insight. Shelley believed that Imagination in itself is an instrument of moral good. Like Plato, Shelley believed that poetry is the creative principle in man. Poets, according to Shelley, are not only authors of language and of music, but they are also the institutions of laws and the founder of civil society. He further argues "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Poetry, according to Shelley, is the expression of the universal spirit through words.

As a poet of Nature, Shelley is a Pantheist, because he finds a universal spirit or power working through Nature, controlling this universe. Pantheism is the belief that God is in everything and everything is God. Thus, Shelley is very fond of using the images borrowed from the natural world. He describes the objects of Nature with precision and scientific accuracy. Shelley pictures and presents Nature in its different moods– sometimes, Nature is presented in close association with human affections and sometimes she represents an absolutely detached and unconcerned way. Whereas

Wordsworth spiritualises Nature, Shelley intellectualises it and uses it as a symbol of his thoughts and emotions. So, naturally, the West Wind becomes the symbol of Shelleyan revolution, a destroyer and preserver. Similarly, the skylark becomes the symbol of that ideal happiness. In "Adonais", pansies are the symbols of his sad thoughts and violets symbolise his modesty and innocence. Shelley's treatment of Nature is scientific as well as philosophical, mythical as well as human. This is what is called Pantheism, based on the theory that all Nature is the expression of one Universal Spirit. The poet identifies the spirit of Nature and the spirit of love. He, thus brings about the Platonic philosophy of love with the age-old doctrine of Pantheism. Under the influence of this spirit of love, Shelley sees in every object of Nature a subtle beauty of the spirit, capable of thinking, feeling and expressing in quite the same way as man. Like Plato, Shelley conceived of a supreme power, which is at once immanent and transcendent and which moves through all objects of Nature and human life. This spirit, according to Plato, is the governing spirit of the universe. Like Plato, Shelly believed that this spirit moves through the universe giving things form and shape according to its power.

9.4 RECEPTION OF SHELLY AS A ROMANTIC POET

Shelley's lyric powers and romantic biography have until recently obscured Shelley's most enduring qualities as a writer: his intellectual courage and originality; his hatred of oppression and injustice; and his mischievous, sometimes macabre, sense of humour (especially evident in his light verse and letters). He was widely read in the classics, philosophy, and contemporary science; he translated from Greek (Plato and Homer), Latin (Spinoza), Spanish (Calderón), German (Goethe), Italian (Dante), and some Arabic fragments. His essays, though very few in number, are highly intelligent. His political pamphlets are both angry and idealistic. His weaknesses as a writer have always been evident: rhetorical abstraction; intellectual arrogance; and moments of intense self-pity. However, in poems

like the "West Wind," or in great prose work like *Defence,* he shows the volcanic hope for a better world, of fiery aspirations shot upwards through bitter gloom.

Shelley's *Letters* have been edited by F. L. Jones in 1964. The major political reinterpretation of his career has been done by K. N. Cameron in *Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (1951) and *Shelley: The Golden Years* (1974). Important modern criticism has also been produced by Harold Bloom (1959), Neville Rogers (1967), Judith Chernaik (1972), Timothy Webb (1976), and P. M. Dawson (1980).



9.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you must have come to discover the unique qualities of P. B. Shelly as a Romantic poet. For Shelley, Poetry is a source of pleasure that combines delight as well as wisdom. At the same time, his poetry is also the clarion call for liberty and equality. Finally, from your reading this unit, you must have understood why Shelley is called more a lyricist than a narrative artist.



9.6 FURTHER READING

Compton Rickett, Arthur. (1983). *A History of English Literature*. New Delhi: Universal Book Stall.

Drabble, Margaret. (ed). (2000). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. (6th edition). Oxford University Press.

J. Long William. (1977). *English Literature*. Boston: Ginn and Company.

Rogers, Neville. (1967). *Shelley at Work: A Critical Inquiry*. Clarendon Press.

Rosenthal, M. L. (1874). *Poetry and the Common Life.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Shelly, P. B. (1993). *Ode to the West Wind and Other Poems*. Dover Thrift Editions.

Shelly, P. B. (2003). *Major Works*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.



9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Shelly was fed up with the existing institutions both religious and political… …while in Oxford he was influenced by Hume's philosophy that led to the publication of "The Necessity of Atheism"…. …this led to his expulsion from the University in 1811.

Ans to Q No 2: A Revolution to Shelley was much more than a political upheaval… …it was a spiritual awakening, the beginning of a new life… …the poem "Ode to the West Wind" represents his ideas in a remarkable way as he addresses the West Wind as both destroyer and preserver.

Ans to Q No 3: Detested by men, Shelley often sought the company of nature… …he transformed aspects of nature into his own dream shapes… …for example, the skylark is viewed as 'a cloud of fire', 'a high–born maiden in a palace tower', 'a glow-worm golden'… … or he urges nature to help him when he falls 'upon the thorns of life'… …Nature for Shelly is interfused with a universal spirit.

Ans to Q No 4: The West Wind is the symbol of both creation and destruction… …the use of different Nature images exemplifies his imaginative power… …Shelley's immortal message about creation through the regenerative role played by Nature.



9.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1: Discuss Shelley's conception of man's relation to Nature, and how does he explore that relationship in his poems?

Q 2: How does his treatment of Nature differ from that of the other Romantic poets?

Q 3: Why does Shelly believe in poetry to be an instrument of moral good? Discuss.

Q 4: What makes "Ode to the West Wind" one of the greatest and most powerful odes with remarkable structural excellence in English literature?

Q 5: State the important works of Shelley as a Romantic poet, and discuss how these poems contributed to English Romanticism.

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