

An Appraisal of PB Shelley's Lyricism

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ABSTRACT

Percy Bysshe Shelley is a famous romantic poet whose poetry is liked by readers and critics for its lyrical quality. They are intensely personal poems which are packed with Shelley's outburst of emotions. The musical and song like quality of Shelley's poems make them memorable and long-lasting. These poems have a unique charm with Shelley's revolutionary messages. Shelley's intense feelings find a perfect expression in his poetry. This paper is an attempt to analyze and appraise the lyrical quality present in PB Shelley's poetry.

Keywords: Lyricism, Romanticism, Emotion, Spontaneity, Musicality.

Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley (Aug 1792-July 1822) was a major English romantic poet. Shelley was a radical in his poetry. He had antisocial and revolutionary ideas and envisaged for an ideal world of his own which is manifested in his poetry everywhere. He wrote in a new style and experimented with verse forms. He had unique poetic imagery. His feelings outburst spontaneously in his poems which made his poetry specially lyrical having musical quality at the same time. He influenced many later poets such as Robert Browning, A C Swinburne, Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats and many more. His best poems include *Queen Mab* (1813), *Alastor, or The spirit of Solitude* (1816), *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (1817), *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), *Ozymandias* (1818), *England in 1819* (P. 1839), *Love's Philosophy* (1819), *Ode to the West Wind* (1819), *The Mask of Anarchy* (P. 1832), *To a Skylark* (1820), *The Cloud* (1820), *The Witch of Atlas* (P. 1824), *Adonais* (1821), *Epipsychidion* (1821), *Music, When soft Voices Die* (1824), *I Fear Thy Kisses, Gentle Maiden* (P. 1824), *A Lament* (P. 1824). His major dramas include *The Cenci* (1819), *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), *Hellas* (1822). His famous essays include *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), *Poetical Essays on the Existing State of Things* (1811), *Declaration of Rights* (1812), *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813), *On a Future State* (1815), *On Love* (1818), *On Life* (1819), *A Defence of Poetry* (P. 1840). According to American literary critic Harold Bloom, Shelly "Was a Superb craftsman, a lyric poet without rival, and surely one of the most advanced skeptical intellects even to write a poem." (Bloom, 410) Cambridge dictionary defines lyricism as "the beautiful expression of personal thoughts and feelings in writings or music". Romantic poetry which began in 1798 with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge is chiefly characterized by its depiction of nature, subjectivity, intensity of emotion and exercise of imagination. Shelley's poetry manifests all these qualities of romanticism. With the depiction of nature and expression of his intense personal feelings in melodious verse he emerges as a major romantic poet and his lyricism is unmatched and unsurpassed.

Features of Shelley's Lyricism

Emotional Intensity

Shelley's poems abound in his expression of his deep passion, an intensity of feelings. His lyrics are deeply personal which reflect his strong feelings of desire, longing and yearning, joy, sadness and pain. His lyrics are cries of melancholy and anguish. The poem *To a Skylark* has an intensity of feeling and becomes a passionate utterance of Shelley. The first stanza of the poem reflects extreme joy.

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
 Bird thou never wert,
 That from Heaven, or near it,
 Pourest thy full heart
 In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

(*To a Skylark*, lines 1-5)

Shelley's lyrics not only celebrate joy, but they express his desire, longing and yearning. For instance, in the above mentioned poem he longs for the kind of joy and gladness which skylark knew and felt.

There is a strong longing and desire for the knowledge of songs and music comparable to Skylark's knowledge of music and songs. The following lines illustrate it.

Teach me half the gladness
 That thy brain must know
 Such harmonious madness
 From my lips would flow
 The world should listen as I am listening now.

(*To a Skylark*, lines 101-105)

A mood of longing and sadness is evident in the lyrics, *Rarely, Rarely, Comest Thou*. Shelley's lyrics abound in sadness and melancholy. The poem *Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples* is deeply personal as it was written in 1818 during the time when "he had not only separated from his first wife but also lost the guardianship of his children by her" (Lall, 219).

The poem expresses a mood of deepest melancholy. The poem presents a contest between the beauty of natural scenery around the Bay of Naples and Shelley's own gloom and disappointment. The following lines express intense feelings of deep melancholy and 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
 Others I see whom these surround
 Smiling they live, and call life pleasure;
 To me that cup have been dealt in another measure.

(*Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples*. Lines 19-27)

Shelley writes in the same lyric that "I could lie down like a tired child, / And weep away the life of care/ Which I have borne and yet must bear, /Till death like sleep might steal on me" (lines – 30-33) and again he laments that he is the one "whom men love not" (line-42). Such strong feelings of sadness and grief are expressed in the poem *Ode to the West Wind* in which he appeals to the West Wind to come to his rescue:

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: tameless, and swift and proud.

(*Ode to the West Wind*, lines 53-56)

The emotions of love is expressed in many of Shelley's lyrics such as *Music, When Soft Voices Die, The flight of Love, A Widow Bird Sate Mourning For Her Love* and *I Fear Thy Kisses, Gentle Maiden*. The lyric *I Fear Thy Kisses, Gentle Maiden* expresses lover's deep love and devotion to his beloved. This is clearly expressed in these lines:

I Fear thy mien, thy tones, thy motion;
 Thou needest not fear mine;
 Innocent is the heart's devotion
 With which I worship thine.

(Lines 5 – 8)

In his famous poem, *To a Skylark*, Shelley contrasts the ecstasy and rapture of Skylark's song with the sadness and sorrows of human life. This is how he expresses:

We look before and after,
 And pine for what is not;
 Our sincerest laughter
 With some pain is fraught,
 Our sweetest songs are those that tell us of saddest thought.

(*To a Skylark*, lines 86-90)

Spontaneity

Spontaneity is one of the most striking features of Shelley's poetry. These poems are pure effusions. They are like the singing of the Skylark which seem to have been written "in profuse strains of unpremeditated art" (*To a skylark*, line5). The whole poem 'To a Skylark' is a pure effusion and "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth). The spontaneity of this poem is unparalleled. It comes directly from his heart. The following stanza would suffice to authenticate it.

Higher still and higher
 From the earth thou springest
 Like a cloud of fire;
 The blue deep thou wingest,
 And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

(*To a skylark*, lines 6-10)

His shorter lyrics and odes exhibit a strong sense of immediacy and seem to be pure effusions. Such most well-known poems which demonstrate spontaneity include *To a Skylark*, *Ode to the West Wind*, *The Cloud*, *Invocation*, and *Music, When Soft Voices Die*. The following lines from *The Cloud* illustrate the quality of spontaneity which is a prominent feature of his lyricism:

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
 From the seas and the streams;
 I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
 In their noonday dreams.

(*The Cloud*, lines 1-4)

Musicality

Shelley's lyrics are outstandingly sweet and musical. His "cries of pain are transformed into beauty and loneliness by the sweet music which accompanies them. Even the most pessimistic of his lyrics produce in our minds joy and delight because of their exquisite melody." (Lall, 37). His melancholy, sadness and self-pity make his poems so sweet and melodious. Shelley himself admits this in the poem *To a Skylark* when he says "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought." (Line 90). It is true with regard to many of his lyrics which express his longing, yearning, self-pity, sorrow, sadness and frustration.

Mathew Arnold remarked about Shelley as "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain". According to him, Shelley had qualities of beauty and idealism, but he could not influence the world. Here, it seems that Arnold misrepresented his idealist views.

Shelley's lyrics such as *To a Skylark*, *Ode to the West Wind*, *The Cloud*, *To Night*, *Invocation*, *Lines to an Indian Air*, *Love's Philosophy*, and many more such poems are excellent literary pieces of lyrical beauty. What more melodious lines than these can be:

The sanguine sunrise, with his meteor eyes,
 And his burning plumes outspread,
 Leaps on the back of my sailing rack,
 When the morning star shines dead;

(The Cloud, lines 31-34)

The use of similes, metaphors and alliteration along with his emotions and imagination transform his poems into beautiful melodious songs. The following stanza from *To a Skylark* illustrates this assertion:

Like a high-born maiden
 In a palace- tower
 Soothing her love laden
 Soul in secret hour
 With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower

(*To a Skylark*, lines 41-45)

Shelley's experiment with verse forms, metre, rhythm along with his passion and imagination with strong yearning and longing for his ideal world- the Golden Age make his poems extremely exquisite and highly lyrical. Shelley's talent as a lyric poet is unmatched and invincible. He possessed unique lyrical qualities which are universally admired and acknowledged due to their manifestation in his lyrical poetry. Shelley revolutionized lyrics in poetry just in the manner he wanted to revolutionize the world order to attain his ideal "Golden Age" based on love, trust, hope, liberty, harmony and absence of any kind of hatred, revenge and oppression. His poetical works like *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Revolt of Islam*, *Hellas* and short poems such as *Ode to Liberty* and *Ode to the West Wind* are packed with his reflections on the "Golden Age". Themes of nature, love, beauty, human condition, freedom, revolution, power of imagination and the human spirit are the major themes around which his lyrical poetry is composed. In this regard David Daiches in his book *A Critical History of English Literature* writes:

There is sometimes hysteria, self-pity and emotional naiveté. But there is a power and conviction in his best work, a visionary integrity and a rhetorical force, that have their own high splendor... Shelley can be strong and sweeping and resonant; he can also be languid and over tremulous. His intellectual powers were considerable and his human interests large. He grew up to a greater degree than modern critics will admit.

(Daiches, 914)

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is evident that Shelley enjoys an esteemed place among the English poets of romantic age for his unique quality of lyricism. Simply put, lyricism is the quality of a poem for its expression of a single deep emotion or thought. Shelley's poetical works have his personal feeling expressed with the accompaniment of imagination, sweetness, beauty, melody and a musical rhythm and metre. Many of his lyrics and long poems are subjective and convey his deep emotions and thoughts on the current state of human affairs and a longing and yearning for a bright future which he calls 'The golden Age' characterized by liberty, equality, harmony, love, and trust. Shelley is unsurpassed and unmatched with regard to his quality of lyricism.

His poems store his various moods and emotions. They present his social, political and philosophical thoughts. Many of his lyrics seem to be pure effusions and spontaneous. They are beautiful songs that can be sung with the help of musical instruments. They delight, and move as well as instruct. They inspire to dream for a better world. Such is the effect of Shelley's lyricism that readers enjoy listening to his songs and lyrics in the manner he himself listened to the song of the Skylark and enjoyed it.

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