

## Reform for freedom in PB Shelley's literary works

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of reform in terms of religious, political and social aspects in PB Shelley's literary works. Selections from Shelley's poetry, prose, essay and drama are reconsidered to show the concept of reform in his works. This paper seeks to unravel Shelley's skeptic revolutionary thoughts that were always misunderstood by the critics of his time. Shelley as a poet perpetuated his life as a reformer, yet his concept of reform was neglected and often downplayed because of his idealistic view of the world. However, the significance of Shelley's concept of reform merits, more reverence, or, at least, more critical consideration than any of the Great Romantics.

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## 1. Shelley's concept of religious reform

Shelley as a social reformer tried to remove the corruption from the prevailing system of the church in his era with the help of his literary writings. His earlier essay "The necessity of Atheism" depicted his skepticism and challenged the doctrines of Christian beliefs. This essay was his first step towards reform. In this essay he directly questions as if men are responsible for their concept of faith or disbelief? He answers, No. In order to make his statement strong he derives Locke's philosophy of perception [1], and explains that our concept of faith is stuck on perceptions and we cannot be held accountable for these perceptions. For Shelley, people who perceive God as an idea and as an existence either become believers or non believers. But in both situations, people are not accountable. Hence, unless people, do not harm other people around their community or society, they should be allowed to practice their religion and faith according to their own perceptions and free will.

In "Essay on Christianity" Shelley adopts a softer and mature tone to describe the religious corruption and tyranny of the ecclesiastical class who exploited religion for their own selfish purposes

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[2]. For Shelley, Jesus upheld and experienced the standards of widespread affection and equity thus did his pupils. Yet, before long, the old estimations of insatiability and voracity reasserted themselves and gradually yet without a doubt, the first teachings of Christ declined in their current structure [3]. However, at the first page of the article Shelley made a fruitless endeavor to debate Jesus' perfect character. He asserted that Jesus was a man who came to be known as an awesome figure by his tenderness, kindheartedness, the considerable affection the general population had for him and the supernatural events appended to his endeavors after his death [3].

Shelley held that Jesus denied God's corrective power: "The absurd and execrable doctrine of vengeance, in all its shapes, seems to have been contemplated by this great moralist (Jesus) with the profoundest disapprobation" [3, p.88]. He likewise contended that the idea of Hell is contrary with the sentiments of Jesus; a man that goes to hellfire wouldn't be taught a lesson by his experience, however will essentially be rebuffed. Shelley credits this at the end of the day to the operators of composed religion who worked for the proliferation of oppression.

Shelley goes ahead to explain Jesus's power to convince people with his logical mind and enabled him to gather masses behind him. This power, Shelley saw as fundamental in the inevitable winning of freedom and balance in England, however, in case it is not dirtied by falsehoods and deception [3]. Shelley portrays Jesus as a champion of the equity of humanity similar to Plato and Diogenes. Jesus, like Plato and Diogenes put human worth as inclusively significant rather than natural wealth which "derive their value from the opinion of mankind" [3, p. 103]. Moreover, Shelley supported a reclamation of mankind's natural harmony. Before man can be free, and rise to and really astute, he must throw away the chains of propensity and superstition [3]. He guaranteed that such endeavors have been made all through history, most fundamentally by Rousseau, whose teachings nearly took after those of Jesus. At the same time Shelley was also against following the any teachings blindly [3]. For Shelley, the best solution to establish a successful society was to abolish tyranny where people would understand their rights and duties through logical reasoning [3]. Thus Shelley's concept of religious reform respects humanity. Although a skeptic in his opinions about the nature of belief, his thoughtful perspective of Jesus can be taken up by present day religious cynics who mercilessly apply the imperfections of modern Christianity to its creator.

## 2. Shelley's concept of political reform

Shelley was an advocate of political reform and this is reflected clearly in his literary works. For instance, his political poems written in 1819 are a clear reflection of social injustices in his time. The end of the Napoleonic wars didn't bring an impressive improvement in the social condition of the United Kingdom. There was an atmosphere of social unsettling, which agitated after some time. By 1819 the political circumstances had come to a breaking point. The policy adopted by the Lord Liverpool government to squash social agitation by gradually building up armed force components in risky regions made the situation of the country even worse. Thus "London alone had a standing army of 138, 000 men" [4, p. XXX]. The circumstances turned into severe agitation on the sixteenth of August 1819, when an extensive horde of around 100,000 unarmed dissenters were charged upon by mounted force [4, XXXI]. As per the flattened Government death estimates, 11 individuals were slaughtered and 421 harmed. Shelley's susceptible nature was dismayed at the slaughter and he composed his most trenchant social feedback during this time. Poems like *The Mask of Anarchy*, *England in 1819* and *Song to the men of England* are a sharp satire on the government and political conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century England.

*The Mask of Anarchy* as indicated by Woodcock (2002) looks like a conversational song poem with a basic four stress meter like that found in the famous verses of broadsheets. Shelley purposely

made the poem so it best used the significant disappointment of the general population. Also, the name of the ballad originates from a humorous touch of the term the legislature utilized for the Peterloo dissidents—"anarchists". Shelley explained that the operators of oppression holed up behind the veil of anarchy and insurgency. These actualities confirm the reality of exactly how sharp the social feedback is in the poem. As indicated by Foot, "The Mask of Anarchy" is one of the immense political protest poems ever [cited in 5]. Also, Shelley utilized searing parody to assault driving government figures at the time, which he tended straightforwardly, by utilizing their names. This was indubitably an exceptionally favorable advertising strategy yet it successfully fixed the poem's distribution destiny. What's most intriguing about "The Mask of Anarchy" is its sensitive equalization of the passivity of the self-conciliatory pacifism, he lectured in his more meek days and the life of brutal uprising. For Woodcock (2002), Stanzas 65-87 of the poem distinctively propose temperance even with cruelty, while some, similar to stanza 91:

*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 [4, p.392].*

As indicated by [4], the above stanza shows Shelley's appeal to the common people to raise their voice against armed forces.

Another striking example of Shelley's theme of political reform is depicted in his poem Laon and Cythna. In this poem the poet provokes the people to take the power of passive resistance by the character of Hermit. Initially Hermit is a figure who is disappointed with the society, but later he helps Laon to spread the message of peace and freedom through the common people. Hermit and Laon gain political knowledge and their knowledge causes restlessness among the tyrant government.

*The tyrants of the Golden City tremble At voices which are heard about the streets, The ministers of fraud can scarce dissemble, The lies of their own heart... [6, p. 82]*

Shelley's voice never stopped against the corrupt government of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his poem "Song to the Men of England" Shelley encourages the common masses to fight for their rights by using a particular language of the peasants and the lower class, Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

*With plough and spade, and hoe and loom, Trace your grave, and build your tomb, And weave your winding-sheet, till fair England be your sepulcher [4, p.406].*

He likewise highlighted the way that the general population themselves were in charge of their own situation, and that they can win equity for themselves just on the off chance that they can shake away their lack of involvement. This poem, in the long run got boundless acknowledgment. The English Communists appropriated it for their own reasons, particularly the opening lines:

*Men of England, wherefore plough, For the lords who lay ye low? [4, p. 405]*

Shelley unquestionably didn't evade far from the general thought that he needed to put over, that the tyranny of the Government and the Monarchy is a weight on the English individuals. For instance, his poem "England in 1819" is another example of political criticism.

*An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king, – Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow Through public scorn, – mud from a muddy spring, – Rulers, who neither see, nor feel, nor know, But leech-like to their fainting country cling [4, p. 407].*

The poem closes with a declaration that " a glorious Phantom may burst " from the graves of the old and crude system, and it is indicated that the very dialect proposes a sudden, fierce activity, maybe the rough oust of the harsh government.

Shelley's prose work "A Philosophical view of Reform" written in 1819, is also embedded with themes of political reform [7]. In this essay Shelley discusses the political scenario of the 19<sup>th</sup> century parliament, its drawbacks and presents his solutions to remove these drawbacks. Firstly, Shelley

respected the Long Parliament of the mid-seventeenth century as the Parliament, which best spoke to the different classes of the English individuals [7]. He trusted that its quality had been in an unflinching decay up until the start of the nineteenth century. [7] likewise guaranteed that this supposition made Shelley to a greater extent a reactionary rather than a liberal. This heartbroken condition of the Parliament called for radical change. As indicated by Shelley the aristocratic class was unequivocally against such a change in light of the characteristic inclination of each individual to endeavor to secure an abundant sustenance for themselves and their nearby ones. He goes ahead to name each and every one of those included in this plan of prohibiting change: every open, representative, including the majority and all individuals included in the ruling mechanism, the House of Lords, a number of people from the House of Commons (which Shelley thought ought to be impressively decreased in size), and every single other functionaries of the state organization [4] Secondly, Shelley was also against the bank note system. For him, the introduction of the bank notes was a complete fraud by the government to decrease the value of labour. For instance, ten work hours previously produced what now can be produced in twenty.

Thirdly, Shelley advocated that true political reform could only be achieved if every person is given political awareness, right to vote and freedom of opinion. For instance, "the republican boldness of censuring and judging one another" [4, p. 626] or freedom of opinion with all its purity, was the best tool to attain gradual reform.

Fourthly, Shelley strictly prohibited reform through armed forces. He claimed that the American war of independence and the French Revolution were the two main events that destroyed the economy of England [4].

### **3. Shelley's concept of social reform**

Shelley was an advocate of social reform from his early years of writing. His most frequently read poem, *Queen Mab* is one example of his concept of social reform. Written in 1812 (after Shelley's expulsion from Oxford) with the intention to capture the attention of the elites, the poem is an excellent amalgam of socio-political criticism [8]. The poem deals with the nature of tyranny and Shelley utilizes the fleeting way of domains to demonstrate the powerlessness of dictatorship and force. The *Fairy Queen* records governments which neglected to withstand the desolates of time. The phrase "Palmyra's ruined palaces" clearly indicate the fall of illegal government [4].

The poem contains wild assaults on government, the upper layers of society which feast upon the life power of the discouraged masses. As indicated by Shelley, both force and acquiescence must fall if fairness is to be accomplished. The *Fairy Queen* regrets the hordes of capable people among the confiscated who neglected to achieve their actual potential as a result of acquired wealth imbalance [4]. He likewise furiously contradicts patriotism, as simply one more cog in the machinery of oppression and persecution. The "patriot mob" which aimlessly takes after the requests of the privileged societies is diminished to servility by patriotism and affirms the hostile strategies presented by the authority [4]. In his earlier works Shelley considered evil as external and taken from society. Later, he realized that evil and social injustice is created by man himself, since every individual is the same before the uncaring Spirit of Necessity [8].

To achieve social justice and true reform, wealth was to be distributed equally. Due to the drastic effects of the Napoleonic wars, the rich were getting richer and the poor were becoming poorer. Therefore, reform for Shelley required equal distribution of rights among all the classes of society, be it bourgeois or proletariat [9].

Following are the lines that clearly explain Shelley's views about a capitalist's society and its disadvantages:

*Commerce! Beneath whose poison-breathing shade No solitary virtue dares to spring [4, p.33]*

For Shelley, the tyranny and corruption of the religious organizations was also a source of social inequity. It merits saying that Shelley places the church organizers and the decisive classes in the same gathering, which as indicated by him, work with the sole motivation behind keeping the lower classes oppressed and keeping up the present state of affairs [4]. His principle issue with organized religion is, by all accounts, its part in this deliberate abuse. Here as well, his regulations look like Marxism, which reflected the church as a foundation of the bourgeoisie or elite [9].

Shelley's dedication to reform society never faltered for the duration of his life, however, this dedication was regularly baffled by a powerlessness to impart his thoughts to people in general, either in light of the fact that distributors, similar to Leigh Hunt, were reluctant to repudiate the dissident defamation, and "gagging" laws, or in light of the fact that Shelley's writing was censored instantly taking after production [10]. His poem *Laon and Cythna* was censored due to its themes of incest and this censoring hurt Shelley deeply [10]. The character of Hermit is an example of social reform. He is not afraid of the tyrant rulers and realizes the importance of leader figures (*Laon*) in spurring the masses into action.

More significantly, the Hermit was an unwavering peace-lover and raises his voice against armed forces:

*If blood be shed, 'tis but a change and choice Of bonds, – from slavery to cowardice, A wretched fall!... [6, p. 89]*

Shelley's principles of non-ferocious socio-political involvement influenced the civil disobedience concept by Henry David Thoreau and the concept of passive resistance by Mahatma Gandhi's [11].

#### 4. Conclusion

The objective of the paper was to explain the concept of reform in PB Shelley's literary works in terms of religious, social and political aspects. Most importantly, his pervasive affection which stretched out to every single living thing must be adapted by the collective ethical quality of humanity as an answer for a number of the ills which torment our worldwide development. Shelley's importance as a religious, political and social reformer cannot be downplayed because as an advocate of social reclamation to a development represented by general love and comprehension, Shelley's impact rises above time and can extend through the ages to show mankind how human beings can make life better and prosperous by themselves [10].

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