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Shelley's Ideals and Political Justice: *The Mask of Anarchy* as an Example

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the political activities and ideals that Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) lived by and called for in his poetry and life. As a romantic poet, he believed in many liberal ideals that shaped his active life and affected his political view. Shelley protested against injustice through his words and actions, and made multiple severe statements that attack the politicians and those in power. This paper discusses his poem *The Mask of Anarchy* and states his passive resistance's notion in accordance with the poet's era. The poet himself lived an active resistance and a liberal lifestyle but in this poem he encourages people to have a pacifist attitude in their resistance. The paper analyses the poem line by line in order to discover the ideals in which Shelley tried to express to the English society and to the workers who suffered from the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester.

Keywords: Anarchy, Government, Peterloo Massacre, Political Ideals, Shelley

1. Introduction:

Percy Bysshe Shelley is a revolutionary idealist poet who not only sought to change the world unto a utopia but also worked to change it as an activist. He managed to leave a great inheritance of illuminating ideals and outstanding poetry during his short life. Even so, during his era, he was condemned by most people who knew him and considered him a rebel and a selfish atheist. All these attacks attributed to his religious and political views and ideals, which he expressed freely without any hesitation or restrictions. He made major contributions in his life that lead him to be considered by many poets and activist a source of inspiration, though he was expelled from the university due to his writings and unorthodox visions (Greenblatt 2010, P. 749).

Shelley was different from the poets of the first romantic generation like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the manner of observing nature, he was less meditating over the natural world and more concerned in the tyrannical state of the world and society, he used nature images in the sense of reforming the society and creating a utopian life. He used his poetry as a means of delivering his ideals and was an optimistic viewer of the world, believing that any tyrannical or unequal state could come to a state of equality through reform. He even wore a ring with an optimistic motto "the good time will come" (Salavati 2013, P. 1). He was a source of inspiration to W.B. Yeats, George Bernard Show, Edgar Allan Poe, Thomas Hardy, Eleanor Marx Aveling (Marx's daughter). The list continues with people who were influenced by Shelley's conviction and faithfulness to his causes.

1.1 Shelley's Ideals

Shelley's ideals were driven by a great optimistic view, which influences all of his poetry, even in the bitterest lines he changes the tone in the end and shows an image of a better future. His many notions influenced many great names over the world. the Non-violence resistance idea that he called for, shows his pacific ideals over humanity and how much he believed in the upcoming generations and in their ability to follow the goodness in their hearts.

He advises the reformers to change the world "with folded arms", which does not mean that the raged crowds are mistaken in their rage against the tyrannical governments but that is because as W. B. Yeats (2017) states "temperance and courage would produce greater advantages than the most decisive victory" (1). Shelley criticized the French revolution for its flows and set it as an example for the damages that the active resistance leaves in the country and by making a conflict before reforming the hearts of the men, and he called for a more rational opposition in Ireland in *an address to the Irish People* ⁽¹⁾. He urged the Irish people to endure until the time comes when they will be fully prepared for change, and those who are willing to imply force are not ready yet to grasp the actual happiness. Even in his earliest works, *Queen Mab*, Shelley believes that any society ruled by tyrannical government and aim to reform, is doomed to fail if it is not preceded by a reformation to the hearts of men. This is the only way to make all men as virtuous as who share a universal love, and only this will lead the "kingly glare" to lose "its power".

1.2 Living through his Ideals

According to Stephen Greenblatt (2010) when describing Shelley's revolutionary life, he states that Shelley "dedicated his life to a war against injustice and oppression" (748). His ideals were driven by his sense to create a utopian world. He believed in the notion of social justice that not only applies human beings but to all creatures, and. He set a rule to himself to defend all the lower classes, although he comes from a conservative upper class background. Even animals, which were being slaughtered and mistreated by humans, were defended by Shelley, who sought to promote the idea of vegetarianism through his work *A vindication of natural diet* (1813).

Shelley's political writings are dedicated to the ideals of political justice, freedom and equality. He believed that the tyrannical class is divided into two classes, kings and priests; both suppress the mind and life of the individual, enslaving people and reducing them to submissive unhappy beings, contrary to their original free nature. These two groups, he argued, deprive individuals of their natural right to freedom. According to Shelley, a utopian world can only be created when society eliminates these tyrants and develops a state of harmony, free from the need for a governmental system. (Vogel 1940, p. 44).

2. Analysis:

Shelley's extreme political works appears in the 1819, after he had heard the news of the Peterloo massacre in Manchester. There was an assembly in ST. Peter's field of unarmed protesters, hundreds of trade unionists along with their families came to this carnival that was panned by the government because they wanted to reform the parliamentary representation. Governmental soldiers attacked the protestors and killed eighteen of them including a child, and nearly 700 man and woman were injured and cut down. At that time Shelley was in Italy, as he states in the first line of his poem *The Mask of Anarchy* "As I lay asleep in Italy", and not in Britain . He responded to this murderous act of the government, by writing three fully political poems which radical and oppose the government: *The Mask of Anarchy*, *England in 1819* and *Song to the Men of England*. Leigh Hunt considered the Mask of Anarchy too dangerous to be published during Shelley's lifetime and advised him to rethink its publishing, and until 1832, the poem remained unpublished, until Hunt published it with his preface (Gardner 2002, p. 115)

As Derek Jones (2002) states, Richard Holmes describes this poem as "the greatest poem of political protest ever written in English" (2225) that is because it is so unique in its idea and witty in its criticism over the government. The poem is filled with Shelley's imagery to deliver the message of protesting against the tyrannical regimes.

2.1 The Text

This poem has many interpretations regarding its meaning. The poet, who is known for his active resistance writes his lines which encourage the people to do a passive resistance. It can be said that this a juxtaposition in the analysis of the poem. The words of peace uttering from one of the greatest activist human beings. The politics are highly involved in the reading of this poem, it can be noted that these lines gives their own ethical and political foundation. Shelley wrote this poem for a specific occasion which, and advocated for a passive resistance in a case known as the massacre of innocent people. Matthew Borushko (2010) adds a different point of view to the analysis of the poem stating that "The Mask highlights the special contribution of the aesthetic: its singular effect on the imagination can foster a cognitive

engagement potentially undecieved by fraud and misrepresentation." (34) It can be understood through the ambiguity of the situation and the meaning that Shelley deliberately called for a passive resistance in order not to let the people fall into the trap of losing their rights by violence. This notion that violence creates violence and art and beauty creates peace is the hidden motive and that art and non-violent resistance can cut the progress of violence. So the ultimate theme of this poem can be interpreted as the alliance of aesthetic and non-violence resistance.

Shelley implies many personifications to some concepts that are represented by the massacre , the first one is Murder, followed by "Seven blood-hounds" which is a reference that might refer to the alliances in Britain at that time , and after them came Fraud, who was standing and the children playing under his feet, and he "Had their brains knocked" . Next comes Hypocrisy ridding on a crocodile. The last one to come, which is included in this evil group, is Anarchy:

*Last came Anarchy : he rode
On a white horse, splashed with blood ;
He was pale even to the lips,
Like Death in the Apocalypse.*

*And he wore a kingly crown ;
And in his grasp a sceptre shone ;
On his brow this mark I saw—
I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW! (8-9)*

Anarchy, which as Shelley describes, is God and king of them all. Shelley speaks of these evil concepts and then says they were disguised as bishops, lawyers, peers and spies. He compares the governmental system in Britain to those evil concepts and describes the Anarchy and its followers as if they were in power and rulers of all. The way they are introduced show them as tyrannical figures that suppress society.

There are also personifications which represent the opposed side of Anarchy, for instance Hope. Shelley represents hope as a witness character to the massacre, she was their sitting in the middle of the field where the

tyrannical characters passed her with the horses feet, she was speaking of her father time and says he is weak now, but his better days are coming.

When one fled past, a maniac maid,
And her name was Hope, she said :
But she looked more like Despair,
And she cried out in the air :

‘My father Time is weak and gray
With waiting for a better day ; (22)

Even in this dark moment that has no hope, Shelley tries to say that there will be a better days to the oppressed people and hope is the only force that can stand against these tyrants. Shelley portrays Earth as both the God and mother of all, with nature serving as the source of inspiration to all men, it did not stand against the tyrants, it was the voice of reason for humanity. Earth in the poem, felt the blood of the massacred people in the Peterloo massacre like the labor pain and her heart was calling upon the people and asks them to be strong and courageous in the face of tyrants" Ye are many—they are few".(38) This image represents his use of nature in the context of reality. Nature stands no chance against the forces of injustice.

Shelley's convictions regarding political justice and freedom are fully represented in this poem, where personification of Earth delivered his ideals and notions in her speech to the men of England. Freedom as he repeatedly describes and defines it is the most important element of a life free from evil tyrants. He asks twice for the definition of Freedom “What is Freedom?” and “What art thou, Freedom?” Shelley defines freedom as he sees fit and right, the Earth repeats the question and gives many definitions of it “Thou art Love”, “Thou art Justice,”, “Thou art Wisdom,” and “Thou art Peace”. Firstly he gives opposite elements of freedom and asks, through the personification of Earth, whether such conditions truly embody freedom. (Boyle 2013, p. 1).

‘What is Freedom?—ye can tell
That which slavery is, too well—
For its very name has grown
To an echo of your own.

‘Tis to work and have such pay (39)

Shelley after speaking of his political justice convictions tries to calm the raged crowd, he believes that every active resistance is doomed to be failed eventually, and unless the society is able and mature enough to make the change without violence, the cycle of horror will not end. Shelley says that the notion of blood for blood is unacceptable and resorts to a darker end that will lead the society to its fall.

‘And if then the tyrants dare
Let them ride among you there
Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew—
What they like, that let them do.

‘With folded arms and steady eyes
And little fear, and less surprise
Look upon them as they slay
Till their rage has died away.(84)

The passive resistance in Shelley's mind is the only solution that society have to create a better future, the act of standing in the face of tyrants, even so they use violence, with "folded arms" (79) will eventually lead to the doom of the tyrants. He says that people should wait for those tyrants to be weary and their rage dies. It is a matter of having a strong conviction and will, to be able to face violence, and wait till the tyrants see and realize their actions and the blood that they shed of every member of society, even their own families, will speak and condemns them for this horrible act. These notions require surely great minds that believe in the nonviolence way of life and strong wills that can endure all the hardships in the tyrants' face. Shelley asserts that people's power does not lay in force, but it lays in their numbers when they collaborates with each other and stand in the face of evil, he mentions the crowd power in the last line of the mask of Anarchy "Ye are many—they are few." (91)

‘Then they will return with shame
To the place from which they came

And the blood thus shed will speak
In hot blushes on their cheek.

.....

‘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’. (90-91)

Shelley gives a message in these lines which is one of empowerment and hope. He encourages the oppressed to recognize their collective strength, to rise up against their oppressors, and to understand that justice and moral right are on their side. The poem as a whole serves as a call for political and social action, advocating for non-violent resistance and the eventual triumph of the people over tyranny.

Seth Reno (2013) argues in his review of critical opinions that varies regarding whether shelley's *Mask of Anarchy* is a call for collective effort or a passive non-violent resistance. The most acceptable opinion among critics that this poem is rather ambiguous, they read it as it wavers between taking action and passive resistance. The analysis of this poem can lead to multiple interpretations, but the most accurate interpretation is that this poem is a call for taking non-violence action, " rise like lions" (91) and stand in the face of injustice and perform all the actions needed to deliver the message of protesting in a passive and peaceful method.

3. Conclusion:

In conclusion, Shelley's poetry carries the qualities of simplicity and easy to understand images that delivers his unique notions and ideals. Shelley used language and poetry not to advocate for himself but rather for his beliefs. His ideals and poetry may not be acceptable due to his harsh words, liberal style in life and extreme idealistic vision. The conservative society punished him and he never favored the noble class or tried to win their love. Many of his works remain unpublished and not very famous after his death, he lived and died as an outcast in his career and life, and until the 1920s, his work *A philosophical view of Reform* was a manuscript. He was different from his

seniors in Romanticism in his acute images which criticizes the system. He was an ambitious character who wanted to reform his surroundings and his world, and he made big contributions to the ideals of humankind. He used his voice in *The Mask of Anarchy* to advocate for a reasonable and mature political attitude toward the massacre. He knew that this incident will attribute in a chain of unfortunate incidents that will befall the citizens. He called for a passive non-violence resistance knowing well that words like this coming out of a poet like him will make the people realize that there is a bigger political notions needed to be understood in performing their resistance. The poem is highly meaningful with the capability of spreading the peaceful sense of resistance to the lamenting hearts of the people.

Footnote

1. “The French Revolution, although undertaken with the best intentions, ended ill for the people; because violence was employed, the cause which they vindicated was that of truth, but they gave it the appearance of a lie, by using methods which will suit the purposes of liars as well as their own.” *An Address to the Irish people*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

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مُثل شيلي والعدالة السياسية : قناع الفوضى انموذجا

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المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث الأنشطة السياسية والمُثل التي عاشها بيرسي بيش شيلي ودعا إليها في شعره وحياته. آمن شيلي بالعديد من المثل الليبرالية كونه شاعراً رومانسياً والتي شكلت حياته وأثرت على نظراته السياسية. احتج شيلي على الظلم من خلال كلماته وأفعاله، وأدلى بعدة تصريحات قاسية تهاجم السياسيين وأصحاب السلطة. يناقش هذا البحث قصيدته "قناع الفوضى" ويوضح مفهوم الاحتجاج السلمي وفقاً لعصر الشاعر. عاش الشاعر نفسه حياة من المقاومة اللاسلمية وأسلوب حياة متحرر، ولكن في هذه القصيدة يشجع الناس على اتخاذ موقف سلمي في مقاومتهم. يحلل البحث القصيدة بآلياتها لاكتشاف المثل التي حاول شيلي التعبير عنها للمجتمع الإنجليزي وللعمال الذين عانوا من مذبحه بيترولو في مانشستر.

الكلمات الدالة: الفوضى، الحكومة، مذبحه بيترولو، المثل السياسية، شيلي