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The Theme of Bipolar Conflict in the Plays of Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Abstract

Percy Bysshe Shelley is a celebrated English romantic poet. His reputation as a poet rests on his lyrics and odes. But he is known as much for his plays in verse as for his poems. He differs greatly in this respect from the other romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Byron as they have not produced plays in verse. Moreover, he is unlike Wordsworth as he does not deify nature. Nor is he like Keats who identifies Beauty with Truth and declares "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever" or like Byron who writes poetry with sharp satirical vein. That is, he belongs to the romantic tradition of English poetry but stands apart as a shining star with his poetic plays and his revolutionary temperament. Shelley is a poet par excellence by virtue of his moods of ecstasy and langour, his mythopoetic imagination, his swooning idealism and his eccentric unworldliness. With all these poetic qualities he shines bright as a playwright. His plays are only a few namely Prometheus Unbound, The Cenci, Hellas, Oedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant and Cyclops. The meagre number of his plays is due to the short span of his life. This again makes him an exceptional poetic personality. Had he lived longer, he must have produced a bigger bulk of poetry and plays. Shelley's poetic plays provide a wide scope for exploration of his talent, his conflict, his creative spark and his personality. The present study, therefore, will be a contribution to the reevaluation of bipolar tension in the plays of Shelley.

Introduction

Very complex is the process of the creation of art. It consists in conception of an idea, its comprehension and then its expression in the best way. As soon as an artistic experience in response to a stimulus enters the chamber of creative process, the whole complex of the personality of the artist changes. He experiences some unique feature in his personality and regains the calm of mind all passions spent only when the process of creation is complete. Art never conforms to a formulae or a set of rules. The artistic experience itself evolves them. This accounts primarily for the variety and complexity that we find in the world of art. Aristotle and Plato, for instance, have laid down rules and given some precepts for composing poems, writing dramas and so on. But their rules are derived on the basis of existing monuments of art. They do not hold good for all the time to come. They are, however, historically important for having given the infrastructure on which the subsequent generations have built the structure of art in accordance with the zeitgeist and the requirements of art. Prometheus Unbound is a poetic drama of epic nature. Based on the Greek myth of Prometheus it bodies forth in symbolic terms the ultimate victory of love over hate and revenge. It delineates the theme of freedom of the oppressed from the oppressor. It points to the poet's pious task of liberating mankind from any sort of subjugation. Being influenced greatly by Rousseau's observation, "Man is born free but he finds everywhere in chains" Shelley wrote Prometheus Unbound which mirrors distinctly his strong dramatic deftness and excellent poetic talent.

'Prometheus Unbound' is the most popular of Shelley's poetic plays. But the 'Cenci', a blank verse play, is the most satisfying piece of his dramatic art. That is, it is the best of his plays from the viewpoint of structure. It is enacted not on the cosmic plane like Prometheus Unbound, but on the real and human plane. It explores the sick and the morbid world by dealing with the incest of a lewd old man drawing sadistic pleasure out of inflicting torture and all sorts of pains upon his children. 'Hellas' is a lyrical drama inspired by the possibilities of the Greek revolt against the Turkish domination. Its theme is Liberty and freedom for people from bondage and authority. It embodies strong optimism suggestive of a better future for mankind. A significant milestone in Shelley's dramatic career, it serves as the starting point for another Shelleyan vision of war between right and wrong. It is about in passages of great lyrical beauty alternating between sublime raptures and pathetic cadences. 'Oedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant' is a

dramatic satire. It is a mixture of satire and fantasy. It contains Shelley's dislike for social privilege and imperial look as George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' does. The fable in it fits into Shelley's philosophy of revolution. Its plot is rich in symbolism. 'The Cyclops', too, is a satiric drama. It is based on the Greek mythology. It is, of course, Shelley's residual dramatic attempt. It is more narrative than dramatic. Yet its language as usual is heavily spiced with imagery and symbolism seeking to express the unattainable truth. In it Shelley accords an approximation to his conception of the skylark.

Discussion

Shelley's mature poetry where his experiences 'compacted lie' too is not just the pouring forth of his emotion. A good deal of thinking is believed to have preceded before he could feel, 'Our sweetest songs are those that tell of the saddest thought.' Content and form are complementary and supplementary to each other. They are supposed to move in close proximity in artistic creation. When we compare Shelley's early poems with those of the mature ones, we discount how he like Keats, "bids joy a farewell" for a nobler life where he "may find the agony and strife of human heart." Shelley's dramas Prometheus Unbound and The Cenci are the expressions of the agony and strife of human heart. Switching over from one form of literary composition to the other on the part of the artist also speaks of artistic tension; tension between creative energy and the form. George Bernard Shaw wanted to be a novelist. He tried his hands on a few but was very quick to realize that his genius was alien to the craft. On the other hand, Henry Fielding, Henry James and also D.H. Lawrence originally wanted to write dramas. But since day would not successfully meet the demands of dramatic art, they had to turn to the craft of fiction. Here they excelled beyond all measures. James's *The Other House* is a narrative in form but dramatic in content and spirit. He intended to cast his experience in the dramatic form but realising his limitation as a playwright he presented it in the form of fiction. James's *The Other House* and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, for instance, demonstrate their shortcomings in terms of content-form relationship. The former illustrates that material appropriate to the theatre can hardly be accommodated in the narrative form, and the latter shows constraint on Shelley's lyrical genius in delineating highly poetic experience in dramatic form. A great artist as such is one who achieves a fusion of the two—the matter and the manner, the content and the form. However, Shelley's attempts at drama with all his shortcomings give us a peep into his genius. He might not have

achieved perfect synthesis of what I.A. Richards calls the 'thought and form'. But he has gone a long way in this direction. He is definitely an artist of promise. But before he could fulfill it, he left us for his journey to the other world.

The creative urge according to Byron is just like 'eruption of the Lava'. This needs to be exploited for artistic purpose before it is allowed to be cooled down. But in his romantic satires, for which he stands out among his contemporaries, has put artistic restraint upon himself. He seems to be aware that inspiration and emotion need some viable form through which they could be adequately expressed. To Wordsworth it is the 'overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility'. The term 'recollected in tranquility' in relation to, 'powerful feelings' is highly meaningful. This recollection suggests a pause to find the form, the words, and the images in which the powerful feelings could be better clothed. Again Wordsworth wanted to use the language of the common man in his poetry suggesting not only that he wanted to give a particular locale to his poetry but also with a view to communicating his feelings better to the common people. To Shelley, however, the creative image of the artist is like a 'fading coal'. "Poetry", he says, "is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds". This poet of the romantic revival of the 19th century speaks of some kind of urgency of taming down the creative impulse. Their views on the creative process suggest that true creative artists are stirred by the compulsion of an inner image to communicate. On analysis we find that the Romantics by and large confirmed to similar process of poetic creation. But different ages have different demands on art and the artists consciously or unconsciously responding favorably or by way of disapproval, fall in line.

But at times the individual genius of the artist comes in conflict with the artistic norms set down by the tradition. The individual artist does not find himself comfortable with the taste and temper of the age. Such a situation calls for modification of the sensibility of the artist or the technique, the form in which he speaks to express himself or sometimes both have to be adjusted in accordance with the need. Whenever an artist is confronted with a problem like this a kind of tension sets in. Distinction maybe in the mind of The artist and also the work of art he creates. The subordination of artist's personality to artistic skills is what Eliot calls 'continual extinction of personality'. The more it is, the more relevant the art would be to the community. Perhaps this is what Henry James, a celebrated novelist and novel critic, has in mind when he considers art as a 'chemical process' and artist an

Alchemist. According to him human life in the raw form is "a sad show...Ugly, heavy and complex. The only subject of art for man of feeling is to make all disagreeable evaporate.

The tension which set in the artistic process is generated either due to the conflict between 'nature and art' or between the 'man and the moment' or between the individual talent and the tradition. Shelley's dramatic art too manifest tension in respect of accommodating his lyrical impulse in the dramatic form is a good deal of tension therefore must have been there in the mind of Shelley in presenting a theme apt for lyrical presentation which has been yoked by violence in the dramatic form in Prometheus Unbound. The genius of the 19th century Romantics, particularly those of Wordsworth and Shelley were essentially lyrical. In their lyrics they have mostly portrayed laugh for the lady as well as love for Nature. The inspiration of the lyricists is short Wordsworth, for instance, is at his best in shorter lyrics and romantic sonnets. His major poems like 'Tintern Abbey and The Prelude' are not as successful as his shorter poems are. Wordsworth and Shelley were not able to sustain their artistic inspiration for long.

The Romantics generally tend to concentrate on Central human problems and situation. They hardly depict the story or characterizations which are essential demands of drama. Elaborating this point it is observed, 'Their art does not seem to meet the demands of either the drama or the novel', and these forms dictate an unexamined expectation in literature to a surprising extent. The evaluation of 'dramatic', in fact from a descriptive to an evaluative term has become pernicious as the similar elevation of 'concrete'. Drama on the other hand calls for objectivity in selection of the subject as well as its treatment. Since the Romantic poets were by and large incapable of sustaining their inspirations and objectify them, this age is remarkably deficient in dramatic art. Shelley's attempt at drama is bold endeavour on his part. Here we have to examine how far the subjective and lyrical trades of his poetry has been amenable to dramatic needs. Shelley in his dedication to The Cenci candidly admits: 'Those writings which I have hitherto published, have been little else than vision which impersonates my own apprehensions of the beautiful and the just. I can also perceive in them the literary defects incidental to youth and impatience; they are dreams of what ought to be, or maybe. The drama which I now present to you is a sad reality. This clearly shows the progression of an artist on the land of fancy to the land of reality. Like Wordsworth he also listens to the 'still sad music of humanity'. This is how Shelley is drawn towards writing his dramas. He knew that the reality of life that has lately dawned

upon him, as Earth for theatre which he had developed, he tended to write dramas. What we have to see here is how dramatic his dramas are.

'Prometheus Unbound', despite dramatic form remains lyrical in spirit. The very title explains the nature of his drama the writer himself calls it a 'lyrical drama in four acts'. The theme that has been delineated here is epic. It concerns the entire human race-past and present and also future. The action of this drama hardly takes place on the stage. Instead there enacted in the mind. Modern psychological dramas are also deficient in action on the physical plane. But the themes 'the depict' do not encompass the whole human race. This makes the drama abstract. The drama critics frown at such abstractions. Arguments, however, could be advanced in respect of Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral'. Viewed in the broader perspective his drama also embraces the mankind for it glorifies martyrdom- martyrdom not for the sake of martyrdom but for something else. Martyrdom to watch purpose is at the core of this drama. The characters of Prometheus Unbound are elemental powers, the spirits and the effect is that of an allegory. Shelley elaborates: The imagery which I have employed will be found, in many instances, to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed. This is unusual in modern poetry, though Dante and Shakespeare are full of instances of the same kind: Dante indeed more than any other poet, and with greater success. This accounts for the same and setting being undramatic in the modern sense.

For most part the dialogues virtually ebb down to the level of monologues. They are so lengthy and elaborate that the audience might not be able to keep pace with them. Shakespeare's characters, on the other hand, use poetry appropriate to theatre. Use of prose in a Shakespeare play also enhances the dramatic effect. Though untutored, Shakespeare seems to have developed intuition and insight in dramatic art. He had the uncanny understanding of human nature. In his connection it would be relevant to see what Shelley himself has to say on the subject. The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry is as a prismatic and many sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them with majesty and beauty, and multiply is all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.

With *The Cenci*, however, the case is a little different. Here Shelley handles theme powerfully. Beatrice the heroine of this drama is a victim of the incest of her father. She suffers all through from the sense of guilt and those she is not at all guilty. Her brothers are equally sufferers at the hands of their father. The portrayal of the suffering of Beatrice is dramatically more effective. When we place *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* side by side, the latter stands out both in respect of what Henry James terms, "germ" of the drama and its rendering on the stage. Tension between the lyrical and the dramatic, and the narrative and the dramatic usually said in the process of a lyrical genius trying to accommodate the turn and twist of his emotion in the dramatic form. This is true in respect of the narrative account when it seems to be expressed in the dramatic form. The dialogue on the stage is more direct presented with economy of expression. The dialogue in the narrative is not essentially so. A narrative artist enjoys great of freedom because he does not have the constraints of the theatre. J.M.Synge is perhaps right when he says that in a drama every speech should be 'as fully flavored as a nut or an apple'.

Here Synge suggests that every speech in drama must be relevant and convey the meaning with economy of expression. This observation, however, does not imply that fictional form is apt to luxuriate into words and expressions. It simply implies that action being the main aspect in a drama to concentrate on the speech should be colloquial, direct and precise in nature to match with dramatic action. We have quite a host of narrative artists whose language is precise. They hardly luxuriate themselves to words and expressions. Jonathan Swift, George Orwell belongs to this group. Here the general tendencies of the lyrical and dramatic on the one hand and the narrative and the dramatic on the other hand have been highlighted. Again the dramatic conflict- conflict on the physical, ideological or the psychological plane is effectively presented through dialogue. In Shelley's '*Prometheus Unbound*' and '*Hellas dialogues*' read like monologues reflecting his limitations as a playwright. Shakespeare makes up many of his shortcomings through dramatically relevant use of blank verse which follows speech rhythm. Shelley's blank verse, however, does not ebb down to the common speech rhythm.

Conclusion

We find bipolar tension in Shelley's plays. The tension in the artistic process is generated either due to conflict between 'nature and art' or between the 'man and the moment' or between individual talent and the tradition. He has acknowledged the demands of

different forms of literary art which intern put some constraints on the creative inspiration and its expression on the part of the artist concerned. He explains: The language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination, and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments, and conditions of art have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression. The former is a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud which enfeebles, the light of which both are mediums of communication. Here Shelley explains the relationship between the experience of the artist and the form he chooses to communicate his experience.

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