

Revolutionary Vision and Human Fragility in Percy Bysshe Shelley's Sonnets

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Abstract: *Percy Bysshe Shelley is remembered as one of the major poets of the Romantic period. Although he wrote fewer sonnets than some of his contemporaries, his sonnets remain important because they combine political criticism, philosophical reflection, emotional intensity, and artistic experimentation. This article examines several of Shelley's best-known sonnets, especially Ozymandias and England in 1819, in order to explore how Shelley represented power, political corruption, mortality, and social injustice. The article also discusses the connection between Shelley's personal beliefs and his poetic style. Unlike many traditional sonnet writers, Shelley used the sonnet form not only for love poetry but also for revolutionary and intellectual ideas. His poems often feel emotional, restless, and deeply personal. That quality continues to attract readers today.*

Key words: *Percy Bysshe Shelley, Romanticism, sonnets, Ozymandias, England in 1819, political poetry, Romantic poetry*

Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born on August 4, 1792, in Sussex, England, near Horsham at Field Place. He was the eldest son of Timothy and Elizabeth Shelley. His grandfather, Sir Bysshe Shelley, was one of the wealthiest men in Sussex, while his father served as a member of Parliament. Shelley received his early education under the guidance of Reverend Edwards, a Welsh clergyman.[1] Later he studied at Sion House Academy and then at Eton College. During his years at Eton, Shelley became interested in Gothic literature, supernatural stories, science, and philosophy. He also began writing at an early age. Shelley entered Oxford University in 1810, where he developed strong interests in philosophy and free thought. Together with his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, he wrote *The Necessity of Atheism*, a pamphlet questioning religious orthodoxy.[2] Because of this publication, Shelley was expelled from Oxford in 1811. This event became an important turning point in his life. Shelley's relationship with his father worsened and he experienced financial difficulties for several years. Yet these struggles also strengthened his rebellious spirit and influenced much of his later poetry. Today Shelley is remembered not only as a Romantic poet but also as a writer who challenged political oppression, religious hypocrisy and social injustice. His poetry combines imagination with revolutionary energy. Even when his language becomes highly symbolic, his emotional sincerity remains clear.[3]

Methodology.

Shelley as a Romantic Poet. Shelley belongs to the second generation of English Romantic poets together with Lord Byron and John Keats. Romantic poets valued emotion, imagination, freedom, nature, and individual experience. Shelley shared all of these interests, but his poetry was especially political and philosophical.[4]

Unlike poets who focused mainly on personal feelings, Shelley often connected private emotions with larger social questions. He believed poetry could influence society and inspire change. His life

itself reflected many Romantic ideas. Shelley rejected traditional authority, criticized established religion, and supported freedom in both politics and personal relationships.[5] These beliefs often caused controversy during his lifetime. Shelley's personal life was also dramatic. At the age of nineteen he married Harriet Westbrook, but later fell in love with Mary Godwin, the daughter of philosopher William Godwin and writer Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1814 Shelley and Mary traveled across Europe together.[6] Their relationship later became one of the most famous literary partnerships of the Romantic era. Shelley spent the final years of his life in Italy, where he produced many important works including *Prometheus Unbound*, *Adonais*, and *A Defence of Poetry*. He died tragically in 1822 when his boat sank during a storm near the Gulf of La Spezia.[7]

Even though he died at only twenty-nine years old, Shelley left a remarkable literary legacy.

Shelley's Sonnet Style. Shelley's sonnets generally follow the traditional English sonnet structure associated with Shakespeare. Most of them contain fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme: abab cdcd efef gg. However, Shelley was not limited by strict poetic rules. He often experimented with rhythm, enjambment, imagery, and irregular phrasing.[8] His sonnets sometimes feel less controlled and more emotionally urgent than traditional Renaissance sonnets. This quality gives them a sense of movement and intensity. Another important feature of Shelley's poetry is imagery. He frequently uses natural landscapes, ruins, storms, shadows, and light to express philosophical ideas. Political criticism in his poems is usually combined with strong visual language.[9] Shelley also expanded the purpose of the sonnet form. Earlier sonnets often focused mainly on romantic love, but Shelley used sonnets to discuss politics, tyranny, religion, mortality, revolution, and artistic freedom.

Result and discussion.

The Theme of Power in Ozymandias. One of Shelley's most famous sonnets is *Ozymandias*, first published in 1818. The poem describes the ruins of a statue standing alone in the desert. The poem begins with a traveler describing what he saw in an ancient land: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert." From the beginning Shelley creates an image of destruction and emptiness.[10] The statue is broken, and only fragments remain. The face of the statue still carries expressions of pride and cruelty: "And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command." These details suggest that *Ozymandias* was once a powerful ruler who believed in his own greatness. Yet the irony of the poem becomes clear later. Although the king called himself "king of kings," his empire has disappeared. The line: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" sounds proud and confident at first. But after reading the final lines, the statement becomes almost absurd.[11] Nothing remains except sand and ruins. Shelley uses this contrast to show that political power is temporary. No matter how strong rulers appear, time eventually destroys everything. At the same time, the poem also praises art. The king is gone, but the sculptor's work survives. In some ways, art becomes more powerful than political authority. This idea appears often in Romantic poetry. Human life is temporary, but imagination and artistic creation may continue long after death.[12]

Political Anger in England in 1819. Another important sonnet is *England in 1819*. Unlike *Ozymandias*, which uses historical imagery, this poem directly attacks the political situation in England. The opening line immediately creates a harsh tone: "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king." The description refers to King George III. Shelley presents the king as weak, disconnected, and incapable of ruling. The poem continues by criticizing princes, rulers, the army, religion and the Senate. Almost every institution in society is described as corrupt or morally empty. One especially memorable image compares the rulers to parasites: "But leech-like to their fainting country cling." The simile suggests that the ruling class survives by feeding on the suffering of ordinary people. Shelley also describes the population as: "A people starved and stabbed in the unfilled field." The alliteration in "starved and stabbed" makes the suffering sound even more violent.[13] Although the poem is deeply pessimistic, the ending introduces a small sense of hope. Shelley imagines that from the "graves" of the old system, a "glorious Phantom" may rise and illuminate the future. The ending feels uncertain. Shelley does not clearly describe what kind of change will happen. Still, the poem

suggests that oppression cannot continue forever. This revolutionary hope is one of the central ideas in Shelley's poetry.

Shelley's View of Society and Human Nature. Shelley believed that society could improve through freedom, education, imagination, and moral progress. His poetry often attacks institutions that limit human freedom. At the same time, Shelley was not simply an angry political writer. Many of his poems also express emotional vulnerability and personal idealism. This combination makes his poetry interesting. Shelley could sound both visionary and deeply human. His sonnets often move between emotional intensity and philosophical reflection. Sometimes he sounds hopeful about humanity's future. At other times, his poetry becomes dark and disappointed. That emotional instability actually gives his work authenticity. The poems do not feel emotionally distant or artificial.[14]

Imagery and Emotional Intensity. Shelley's sonnets are rich in imagery. Ruins, deserts, storms, shadows, blood, light, and decay appear repeatedly throughout his poetry. These images are not used only for decoration. Usually they reflect emotional or political ideas. For example, in *Ozymandias*, the empty desert symbolizes the collapse of power. In *England in 1819*, violent images create a feeling of social crisis and instability. Shelley's language can sometimes feel dense or symbolic, but his emotional energy keeps the poems alive. Readers can sense anger, disappointment, hope, and frustration beneath the imagery. This emotional force is one reason why Shelley's poetry continues to feel relevant.[15]

Conclusion. Percy Bysshe Shelley remains one of the most original voices of the Romantic period. His sonnets combine political criticism, emotional intensity, philosophical ideas, and poetic experimentation. In poems such as *Ozymandias* and *England in 1819*, Shelley questions power, attacks corruption, and reflects on the temporary nature of human authority. At the same time, he expresses hope that social and moral change is still possible. Shelley's sonnets are also important because they expand the traditional purpose of the sonnet form. Instead of focusing only on romantic love, Shelley used sonnets to discuss politics, revolution, justice, mortality, and artistic legacy. Even today Shelley's poetry continues to speak to readers because of its honesty and emotional energy. His poems do not feel cold or distant. They feel restless, passionate, and deeply connected to the problems of human society.

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