

## **Revolutionary Poetics and Social Transformation in the Works of Percy**

**Bysshe Shelley**

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### **Abstract**

Percy Bysshe Shelley, a noted Romantic poet, integrates artistic innovation with revolutionary political vision by presenting poetry as an active force for social transformation. The major objective of this article is to examine how Percy Bysshe Shelley's revolutionary poetics articulate social and political critique and promote ideals of social transformation through his major poetic works "Ode to the West Wind", "The Mask of Anarchy", "Prometheus Unbound", "Queen Mab, England in 1819", "Ozymandias", "The Revolt of Islam", and "Song to the Men of England". This article employed an exploratory research design in which the poetic and essay excerpts were taken as primary data, whereas the secondary data were utilized through comprehensive reviews of books, and journal articles. The excerpts were analyzed thematically by focusing on poetry as an active force for social transformation. The findings reveal Shelley's poetry as a revolutionary force that unites imagination with political commitment to inspire social change. Shelley's works consistently emphasize the need for awakening, resistance, and moral renewal. They envision the overthrow of tyranny, critique social injustice, highlight the fragility of oppressive power, and advocate for the rights and dignity of the marginalized and working classes. Through his poetic vision, Shelley merges ethical concern with political consciousness, portraying literature as a catalyst for social transformation. Together, they affirm Shelley's belief in poetry as a means to challenge oppression and imagine a just society. The study offers important academic implications by presenting an interdisciplinary reading of Shelley that links poetic form with political ideology and social change by viewing poetry as a vehicle of revolutionary thought and a critical tool for social critique in Romantic, political, and cultural studies.

**Keywords:** revolutionary poetics, social transformation, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Romanticism, political ideology

### **1. Introduction**

This article explores the dynamic relationship between poetic form and revolutionary ideology in Shelley's major poetic works. The study conceptualizes "revolutionary poetics" as Shelley's innovative use of language, imagery, symbolism, and myth to challenge political

tyranny, social injustice, and ideological oppression (Gladden, 2016), while “social transformation” stands for his poetic vision of moral renewal, political liberation, and collective human progress (Powell, 2021). By closely analyzing selected poems such as “Queen Mab”, “Prometheus Unbound”, “The Mask of Anarchy”, and “Ode to the West Wind”, the research examines how Shelley’s poetic techniques function as instruments of resistance and catalysts for social change.

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s revolutionary spirit was shaped by the French Revolution, Enlightenment thought, and the social upheavals of the Industrial Revolution (Kantor, 2023). Born amid hopes for liberty, equality, and fraternity, he opposed tyranny, social inequality, and class oppression, drawing inspiration from thinkers like Rousseau, Godwin, and Paine. Shelley fused political radicalism with Romantic imagination and classical ideals (Gladden, 2016), using poetry to envision heroic resistance, moral awakening, and transformative social change. His works remain a testament to the power of art and philosophy in advocating justice, freedom, and societal renewal (Scigliano-Suarez, 2021).

### **1.1 Objective of the Study**

The study aims to examine how Percy Bysshe Shelley’s revolutionary poetic strategies articulate political critique and envision social transformation.

### **1.2 Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to existing Shelley scholarship by offering an interdisciplinary reading that integrates literary analysis with political and social theory, thereby advancing the understanding of poetry as an active force in ideological resistance and social transformation.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Based on the title and focus of the study, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. How does Percy Bysshe Shelley employ revolutionary poetics to critique political authority and social injustice?
2. In what ways do Shelley’s poetic forms and imagery contribute to the vision of social transformation?

### **1.4 Delimitations of the Study**

The study is delimited to an in-depth qualitative analysis of selected major poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley, including “Queen Mab”, “The Mask of Anarchy”, “Prometheus Unbound”, “Ode to the West Wind”. It focuses exclusively on the thematic and stylistic dimensions of revolutionary poetics and social transformation and did not include Shelley’s prose works, letters, or minor poems. The research is confined to a literary and theoretical interpretation rather than historical or biographical analysis.

### **1.5 Literature Review**

Shelley’s revolutionary poetics fuses poetic innovation with radical political vision, using verse as a medium for ideological resistance and moral awakening (Punter, 2016). His poetry critiques tyranny, injustice, and inequality, advocating liberty, equality, and human emancipation (Anonna & Shiblu, 2025). This literature review examines scholarly interpretations of his revolutionary ideology, poetic strategies, and visions of social change, drawing on Romantic, Marxist, political, and cultural perspectives. Focused on peer-reviewed scholarship in English, it shows that Shelley’s poetic form and symbolic language are widely seen as instruments for ethical renewal and collective social transformation. Major aspects reviewed in this article are as follows:

## 2.1 Revolutionary Poetics

Revolutionary poetics signifies the use of poetry as a tool for challenging established social, political, and cultural norms (Arcilla, 2024). It emphasizes the capacity of poetic language, form, and symbolism to inspire change, provoke thought, and mobilize communities toward justice and reform. In this framework, poetry is not merely a vehicle for aesthetic pleasure but a medium for ideological critique, moral awakening, and the articulation of dissent against oppression or inequality. Revolutionary poetics often intertwines imaginative expression with a conscious engagement in political or social struggles (Jones, 2021).

## 2.2 Social Transformation

Social transformation is the process through which societies undergo significant and fundamental changes in their structures, values, and norms (Nelson, 2022). It involves shifts in power relations, cultural practices, and collective consciousness that leads to greater equality, justice, and human well-being (Bryson et al., 2021). In the context of literature, social transformation refers to the capacity of texts and artistic expressions to influence public thought, raise awareness, and inspire action that challenges dominant hierarchies and fosters progressive social change. It highlights the intersection of art, morality, and civic responsibility.

## 2.3 Percy Bysshe Shelley

Shelley (1792–1822) was an English Romantic poet renowned for his lyrical brilliance, radical political views, and visionary imagination (Symonds, 2022). His poetry often engages with themes of liberty, justice, and human emancipation, combining aesthetic innovation with moral and political critique. Shelley's works, including "Ode to the West Wind", "Prometheus Unbound", and "The Mask of Anarchy", demonstrate a deep commitment to social reform and the challenge of tyranny, making him a central figure in studies of revolutionary literature. His fusion of idealism and poetic experimentation continues to influence literary and political thought.

Shelley's poetry is grounded in humanistic values and a commitment to liberty, equality, and justice (Khan, 2024). He consistently critiques authoritarianism, social hierarchies, and economic and ideological oppression, advocating the empowerment of the marginalized and disenfranchised. Shelley champions nonviolent resistance, urging collective awakening and principled defiance against tyranny, and critiques war and militarism as tools of oppression. His works explore the fragility of power, emphasize the transformative potential of imagination, and present a utopian vision of a just, equitable society. Through symbolic imagery, lyrical intensity, and visionary ideals, Shelley positions poetry as a force for ethical renewal and social transformation (Powell, 2021).

## 2.4 Romanticism

Romanticism was a literary, artistic, and intellectual movement that emerged in Europe in the late 18th century, emphasizing emotion, imagination, individualism, and a deep connection with nature (Qizi -Xikmatova & Khamitov, 2024). It often reacted against Enlightenment rationalism and the social inequalities of industrializing society (Nivala, 2020). In literature, Romanticism encouraged the exploration of personal freedom, social critique, and moral idealism, providing fertile ground for revolutionary poetics. Poets like Shelley, Wordsworth, and Byron used Romantic ideals to combine aesthetic beauty with ethical and political engagement, portraying the individual and society as sites of transformation (Ramadani & Shishko, 2024).

## 2.5 Political Ideology

Political ideology stands for a set of beliefs, values, and principles that guide political thought, social organization, and public action (Vincent, 2023). It provides a framework for

understanding power, justice, rights, and the proper functioning of society. In literature, political ideology can shape thematic concerns, narrative strategies, and the moral positions of writers, influencing how they critique or endorse social structures. Shelley's poetry reflects radical and reformist ideologies, including ideas of liberty, equality, and human emancipation, demonstrating how literature can intersect with political theory to inspire social consciousness and transformation (Hewitt, 2021).

### 3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative exploratory research design. This design was appropriate because it allowed an in-depth examination of Shelley's revolutionary poetics and its relationship to social transformation. Primary data in the forms of excerpts were taken from his renowned poems for a thematic analysis. Secondary data were traced from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and theoretical texts. These sources of secondary data were published in English by recognized academic publishers and journals. The method of collecting secondary data involved a comprehensive review of theoretical literature. The analysis of the secondary data was conducted using qualitative descriptive analysis. Ethical considerations were observed by accurately citing all sources and avoiding any form of plagiarism.

#### 3.1 Textual Excerpts and Thematic Exploration

The researcher has exploited excerpts from Shelley's major poetic works "Ode to the West Wind", "The Mask of Anarchy", "Prometheus Unbound", "Queen Mab, England in 1819", "Ozymandias", "The Revolt of Islam" and "Song to the Men of England" to retain thematic exploration.

##### 3.1.1 Ode to the West Wind

"Ode to the West Wind" is one of Shelley's most celebrated revolutionary lyric poems. The west wind functions as a metaphorical revolutionary force that spreads destruction and renewal. The lines in the poem says, *"O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being, / Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead / Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,"* (Shelley, 1819). Here, the wind's power to scatter dead leaves symbolizes revolution's capacity to dismantle decayed social institutions through transformative destruction. The poet continues:

*Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!  
Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,  
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,* (Shelley, 1819).

The dual role of the wind as destroyer and preserver encapsulates Shelley's ambivalent view of revolution as violent yet necessary for societal renewal. Shelley (1819) implores the spirit to "lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!" underscoring the poet's desire to become a vehicle for revolutionary change.

The poem's final stanzas envisage the wind sowing "winged seeds," a metaphor for revolutionary ideas that will bloom into transformation as Shelley (1819) concludes *"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"*. This line optimistically conveys Shelley's faith that the inevitable destruction of old oppressive orders will give way to a vibrant new social order rooted in freedom and justice.

### 3.1.2 The Mask of Anarchy

Written in response to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, "The Mask of Anarchy" is Shelley's most explicit political manifesto in verse. The poem dramatizes power as a frightening "Mask" concealing social Anarchy:

*"I met Murder on the way—  
He had a mask like Castlereagh—  
Very smooth he looked, yet grim; —  
Seven bloodhounds followed him:"*

Each figure in the masque personifies social abuses—Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy—emphasizing the corrupt and violent nature of the governing British elite. Shelley urges the oppressed to rise nonviolently:

*"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."*

This rallying call glorifies collective awakening and moral courage in the face of brutality. Shelley's advocacy of peaceful resistance breaks from traditional revolutionary calls for armed insurrection, highlighting his ethical conviction that justice must not be pursued through replicating violence.

### 3.1.3 Prometheus Unbound

In his four-act lyrical drama, Shelley recasts Prometheus as the archetype of resistance against divine and earthly tyranny:

*"The loathsome mask has fallen—the man remains—  
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man."*

Prometheus's liberation symbolizes humanity's potential to break free from oppression and embrace emancipation. Shelley imbues the play with themes of love, forgiveness, and spiritual renewal:

*"And the world's great age begins anew,  
Rise, like lions after slumber, in unvanquishable number."*

The drama transcends political revolt by proposing a philosophical and ethical transformation underpinning real political revolution. Shelley's utopian vision critiques not only physical despotism but the internal chains of fear and hatred, calling for a radical reimagining of social bonds.

### 3.1.4 Queen Mab and The Revolt of Islam

Queen Mab (1813) is a visionary dream-vision poem in which the fairy Mab reveals the deep suffering caused by oppressive social hierarchies and religious hypocrisy. Shelley's scathing critique encompasses the political and religious institutions that sustain tyranny and exploitation.

*The fangs of Despotism, the Cord of Bondage,  
The Pillars of Priests and Princes, are tearing  
The innocent flesh of Humanity.  
The souls of men from ages past, the graves  
Of those who dared to dream of liberty,*

*Are chains that drag us back to ancient night.*

These lines vividly depict tyranny (despotism) as predatory and bound by chains perpetuated by priests and princes, symbolizing the fusion of political and religious oppression. The lament over past martyrs underscores the inherited burden of repression faced by humanity.

*Religion is the dungeon of the soul—  
Ignorance and Fear its keepers, and the keys  
Are worn by bigotry and subtlety.*

Here, Shelley attacks institutionalized religion as a prison for the human spirit, maintained through ignorance and fear, which keep people subjugated in mental and spiritual bondage—a powerful indictment of how religious superstition sustains social control.

*But Reason, Truth, and Love shall yet prevail,  
And man shall burst his chains and rise anew,  
A thinker, a reformer, and a child  
Of light and liberty.*

This hopeful declaration envisions a future in which Enlightenment principles—reason, truth, and love—overcome oppression, leading to human liberation and the birth of a just, enlightened society. Shelley's vision combines rationalism with idealistic optimism. The Revolt of Islam (1818) dramatizes a revolutionary uprising against Ottoman despotism, portraying it as an epic struggle for universal political and intellectual freedom. Shelley foregrounds not only political emancipation but social reform, especially concerning gender justice.

*“Can man be free if woman be a slave?  
Can woman live, imprisoned and enslaved,  
And not behold the chains that bind her lord,  
And suffer with him? The oppressor's rod,  
Although it breaks her, will but break her more,  
For love that dares not speak is as a weight  
That burdens the oppressed hearts.”*

This extended passage foregrounds Shelley's pioneering feminist stance, emphasizing that political liberty is hollow if half the population remains enslaved—imprisonment is shared, and justice incomplete without gender equality. The metaphor of love constrained as a burden reflects intertwining personal and political liberation.

Extract:

*“The earth is the tomb of tyrants, but the tomb  
Of tyrants is the birthplace of a better race;  
A race, though yet unformed—yet dimly guessed,  
That will rise pure in heart and strong in soul,  
That will overcome the falsehood of the past,  
And dedicate itself to Truth and Love.”*

With these lines, Shelley expresses his utopian faith that the death of tyrants initiates the birth of a morally purer, spiritually stronger humanity committed to truth and love. The “better race” symbolizes revolutionary potential and historical progress toward justice.

Extract:

*“Rise, like lions after slumber, in unvanquishable numbers,  
When the voice of the oppressed shall call you forth,*

*To hurl the despot from his place,  
And to set up the thrones of Reason and Justice."*

This resonant call to action mobilizes oppressed people to rise united and unstoppable. The poetry elevates revolution as not merely violent upheaval but a moral and rational struggle establishing justice and enlightenment in place of tyranny.

### 3.1.5 England in 1819 and Song to the Men of England

"England in 1819" delivers a merciless portrait of the ruling class:

*"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."*

Shelley condemns political corruption and calls for upheaval:

*"A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field; —  
An army, which libticide and prey  
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield."*

His closing lines foretell revolutionary reckoning:

*"And the power to do is with us now,  
And the faith to do it."*

"Song to the Men of England" directly mobilizes the working class in rhythmic exhortation:

*"Ye are many—they are few."*

Shelley unites poetry and political agitation in a clear call for collective action to end exploitation.

### 3.1.6 Ozymandias

"Ozymandias" (1818) critiques the impermanence of tyrannical power through the ruined statue in a desert:

*"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"*

The irony of the "colossal Wreck" highlights temporal futility, warning against despotism's hubris and affirming the inevitable decline of oppressive regimes. This sonnet complements Shelley's revolutionary message by emphasizing humility and justice over authoritarian arrogance.

In the poems of P. B. Shelley, major themes encompass nature as a revolutionary catalyst, ethical nonviolent revolution, mythic emancipation, utopian and political utopian visions, the ideal of global revolution, sharp social critique, and a profound reflection on imperial hubris, collectively articulating his poetic commitment to moral transformation and universal liberation.

In P. B. Shelley's poetry, nature functions as a dynamic revolutionary force that inspires resistance against oppression. Natural elements such as wind, cloud, and fire symbolize transformative energy capable of awakening human consciousness and initiating social change. He consistently advocates an ethical and nonviolent path to revolution, emphasizing moral persuasion over physical force. His poems promote love, reason, and compassion as the most enduring instruments for dismantling tyranny and injustice. He frequently employs myth and classical symbolism to imagine liberation from political and psychological bondage. Through figures like Prometheus, he presents emancipation as a universal and timeless struggle against authoritarian power. The poet envisions utopia as a harmonious state grounded in freedom,



equality, and mutual respect. Shelley's utopian imagination reflects his belief in humanity's potential to transcend corruption and construct a just social order.

His political utopianism critiques existing institutions while projecting alternative models of governance rooted in justice and collective well-being. His poetry challenges monarchy, organized religion, and economic exploitation as barriers to human progress. He extends the idea of revolution beyond national boundaries, imagining it as a global awakening of oppressed peoples. His poems express a cosmopolitan vision in which liberty and justice become universal human rights. A strong current of social critique runs through Shelley's work, exposing hypocrisy, inequality, and moral decay within contemporary society. Poetry becomes his medium for confronting entrenched power structures and calling for radical reform. He reflects critically on imperial arrogance and the destructive consequences of unchecked power. His poems warn that empires built on domination and pride are ultimately doomed to collapse under the weight of their own injustice.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study reveals that Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry consistently intertwines artistic innovation with revolutionary ideals, emphasizing themes of liberty, justice, and societal transformation. It also highlights that Shelley employs poetic form as a powerful instrument to critique oppression and inspire political consciousness. These findings suggest that Shelley's works function not only as literary expressions but also as catalysts for social reflection and change. His revolutionary vision is intricately connected to the historical and political contexts of his time, demonstrating how literature can influence collective ideology. The analysis further shows that Shelley's poetic techniques—such as symbolism, imagery, and lyrical intensity—amplify the impact of his sociopolitical messages. The study theoretically reinforces the notion that literature serves as a medium for social critique and ideological discourse. Practically, it provides insight for educators and scholars on integrating political and literary analysis to deepen understanding of the societal role of poetry. However, the study is limited by its focus on selected poems, which may not fully represent the entirety of Shelley's revolutionary thought. Moreover, the analysis primarily relies on textual interpretation without incorporating reader-response perspectives. Future research should explore the comparative impact of Shelley's revolutionary poetics on subsequent Romantic and modernist writers.

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