

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1792–1822

Radical and idealistic, Percy Bysshe Shelley dreamed of changing the world for the better, of redeeming sordid life, through love, imagination, and poetry. "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," he said. Now regarded as one of the greatest of the English Romantic poets, in his lifetime Shelley was scorned and his work was thoroughly ignored.

Scion of Sussex aristocrats, in line for a baronetcy, Shelley was sent to Eton, where he encountered a peculiarly harsh form of tyranny, the cruelty of bullies. Slightly built, no athlete or fighter, he became the butt of crude jests by older boys. At Oxford University he collaborated on a pantheistic pamphlet with the provocative title *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), for which he was expelled during his freshman year and which alienated him from his father. That same year at the age of nineteen, Shelley eloped from London to Edinburgh with sixteen-year-old Harriet Westbrook and married her despite his belief that marriage was inherently degrading to both partners. Influenced by the radical social philosopher William Godwin, Shelley wrote and had printed privately his first significant poem, *Queen Mab, a Philosophical Poem* (1813), a utopian fantasy in which exploitive institutions wither away as mankind returns to its natural state of virtuous harmony.

Shelley fell in love with Godwin's stunning daughter, Mary. They ran away to France, and Shelley invited his wife to live with them as a devoted sister. Within two years the distraught Harriet had drowned herself. Ironically, Shelley, who saw himself as a champion of the liberties of mankind, now found that most people in England despised him as an immoral, revolutionary atheist. Denied custody of his two children, he chose a life in exile, marrying Mary Godwin in 1818 and moving to Italy.

Shelley was at the peak of his form in the following years, when he wrote his acknowledged masterpiece *Prometheus Unbound* (1820); *The Cenci, a Tragedy in Five Acts* (1819); *Adonais* (1821), a heartfelt elegy on the death of Keats; A



PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, 1819. A. CURTAN.
National Portrait Gallery, London.

Defense of Poetry (written 1821, published 1840), a presentation of Shelley's critical theories; and a great quantity of fine lyrics. The Shelleys settled at Pisa and became the center of a group of friends known as the "Pisan Circle," among whom was Lord Byron. Happy and at home in the midst of these charming swashbucklers, the Shelleys dabbled in political intrigue in the name of Italian and Greek liberty, and Shelley continued to write poetry. He was working on *The Triumph of Life* when he and his friend Edward Williams were drowned when a sudden squall swamped their open sailboat in the Gulf of Spezia on July 8, 1822. Shelley was cremated and his ashes were buried in Rome near the grave of Keats.

Shelley's quest for beauty was as passionate as that of Keats, though Shelley sought it in more rarified spheres: Keats took inspiration from tangible things—a Grecian urn, Chapman's translation of Homer—while Shelley found it in fanciful, imaginary realms where idealism was the true reality. His finest lyrics have a flawlessly musical cadence and a pure and ethereal beauty. Matthew Arnold called Shelley "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."

from *A Defense of Poetry*

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalog of detached facts, which have no other bond of connection than time, place, circumstance, cause, and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of poetry, and forever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. . . . A story of particular facts is a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the

power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.

All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed.

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the center and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. . . . It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things; it is as the odor and the color of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and splendor of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption. . . . Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure.

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. . . . It is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose

traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union, under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes: its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow

from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms.

It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations; for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age.

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. According to Shelley why is a poem superior to a story?
2. The second paragraph of this excerpt presents Shelley's theory of "sympathetic imagination." Explain the meaning of this term. What is the relationship among imagination, poetry, and morality?
3. How does Shelley use the word *divine*? What does divinity have to do with the creation of poetry?
4. From where does the inspiration for poetry come according to Shelley? from the outside? from within? both? Refer to the text to support your answer.
5. Shelley describes the transforming and redeeming quality of poetry. Why is poetry able to exert such power?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Figurative Language.** In defining poetry Shelley relies on some of its devices, such as the imaginative metaphors and similes found in this selection. What meaning is suggested by the food metaphor used in describing the effect of poetry on the imagination? What particular point does Shelley make by comparing poetry to an acorn? Examine the statement in which Shelley compares poetry to the odor and color of a rose and to "unfaded beauty." What two ways does Shelley suggest that the world may be perceived?

What differing aspects of poetic creation are illustrated by a fading coal and a flower? What are the "poisonous waters which flow from death through life"? What do these waters become, in a figurative sense? Explain the image of the wind on the sea. What traces of divine interpenetration remain?

2. **Theme.** Compared with the Puritan view that human nature is essentially corrupt, what would you say is Shelley's view of human nature? of all creation? What concept of the deity is implied in this selection? How does Shelley seem to conceive the role of the poet in society? How do his ideas compare with those of Keats?

Developing Writing Skills

See Handbook: How To Write About Literature, << page 938, Lessons 1-5, 7.

Using Figurative Language. In one paragraph illustrate Shelley's view about poetic creativity with one or two original similes or metaphors. As an alternative, you might illustrate your own theory regarding the source of human creativity as it is manifested in poetry, music, sports, or another expressive activity. Try to clarify what seems to be a mysterious process by means of figures of speech.

Ozymandias¹

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, 5
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: 10
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

1. Ozymandias (äz ĩ man' dē əs) was the Greek name for Ramses II of Egypt who ruled from 1292–1225 B.C. He was noted for building palaces and temples and many statues of himself.

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. Describe the monument as it originally appeared and in its ruined state.
2. What "passions" were read by the sculptor?
3. *Survive* in line 7 is a transitive verb, with *hand* and *heart* as objects. Whose hand? Whose heart? What is the antecedent of *them* in line 8?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Speaker.** Who are the two speakers in this poem? What is the effect of having the statue described and the commentary presented by one speaker through another? How does this technique differ from that used in most Romantic poems?

2. **Diction: Connotation.** Can you think of a substitute for the word *antique* in line 1? Would it be as effective? In line 4 why is *visage* a better word than some other synonym of *face*? Why is *colossal* (line 13) an exactly appropriate word? (Hint: the answer lies in its etymology.)

3. **Sonnet.** Which type of sonnet is this poem? How does the idea pattern fit the form?

4. **Irony and Theme.** Comment on the irony in this poem. What contrasts contribute to it? What theme emerges from the irony?

5. **Mood.** Examine the last three lines. How would you describe their mood? How does the imagery contribute to the mood? What about the sound effects?

To a Skylark

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated
art. 5

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest—
Like a cloud of fire,
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring 10
ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is 15
just begun.

The pale purple even¹
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of Heaven
In the broad daylight
Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy 20
shrill delight,

Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere,²
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear,
Until we hardly see—we feel that it 25
is there.

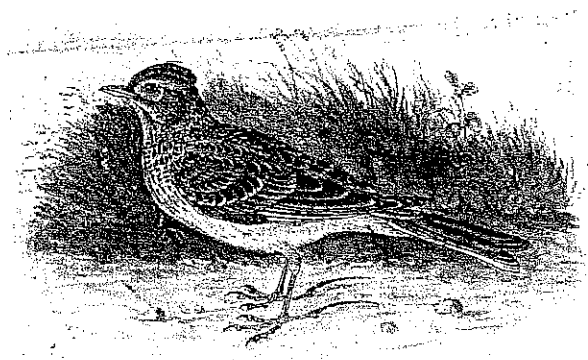
All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and 30
Heaven is overflowed.

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see,
As from thy presence showers a rain 35
of melody.

Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it 40
heeded not:

1. even: evening.

2. silver sphere: the morning star.



SKYLARK. Thomas Bewick.
© Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1981.

Like a highborn maiden
In a palace tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love, which
overflows her bower:

Like a glowworm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering un beholden
Its aerial hue
Among the flowers and grass, which
screen it from the view!

Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflowered,³
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet those
heavy-winged thieves⁴:

Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened flowers,
All that ever was
Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music
doth surpass:

Teach us, Sprite or Bird,
What sweet thoughts are thine;
I have never heard
- Praise of love or wine
That panted forth a flood of rapture
so divine.

Chorus Hymeneal,⁵
Or triumphal chant,
Matched with thine, would be all
But an empty vaunt,⁶
A thing wherein we feel there is some
hidden want.

What objects are the fountains⁷
Of thy happy strain?
What fields, or waves, or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own kind? what
ignorance of pain?

With thy clear keen joyance
Languor cannot be;
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee;
Thou lovest—but ne'er knew love's
sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem⁸
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a
crystal stream?

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell
of saddest thought.

Yet if⁹ we could scorn
Hate, and pride, and fear,
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should
come near.

3. **deflowered**: fully opened.

4. **thieves**: the "warm winds."

5. **Hymeneal**: marriage song. Hymen was the Greek god of marriage.

6. **vaunt**: a boast.

7. **fountains**: sources.

8. **deem**: know.

9. **if**: even if.

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were,¹⁰ thou scorners 100
of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow,
The world should listen then—as I am 105
listening now.

10. were: would be.

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. Where or in what direction is the skylark flying? Describe the scene pictured in lines 11–14. What time of day is it? Why does the skylark seem like a disembodied presence?

2. What effect does the song of the skylark have upon the listener? Cite lines to support your answer.

3. If the bird is a kind of poet of nature, what advantages does it enjoy over mortals? Why is its “unpremeditated art” superior?

4. If it were possible, what would the speaker learn from the skylark? What would be the effect of this knowledge?

5. What does the phrase “harmonious madness” suggest about the nature of poetry?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Figurative Language.** In the long series of similes beginning in line 16, which stanzas compare the bird and its song to some kind of light? Which compare the bird with sounds? with things that appeal to other senses? Where is there a suggestion of something secret or unseen? What kind of image is evoked by verbs suggesting a flowing profusion of song?

Explain the rather precise comparison drawn between the bird and the star in lines 18–25.

2. **Theme.** As evident in “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley is a poet of prophecy, awaiting the millennium, hoping to awaken the spirit of revolutionary change.

Do you see any touches of that quality in “To a Skylark”? What lines in the poem most poignantly express a sense of the mixed state of the human condition, a dissatisfaction with the paradoxes of earthly existence? Do you sympathize with Shelley’s feelings? Does he seem unrealistic or utopian?

3. **Imagery.** The Romantics often felt drawn to nature as a source of the spiritual, even the divine. Shelley in particular, in this poem as in “Ode to the West Wind,” expresses a yearning to identify with some aspect of the natural world, as if to transcend somehow the limitations of ordinary existence. Like the skylark he is a “scorners of the ground” (line 100). Thus his images often seem on the verge of leaving tangible reality behind. Identify several of these ethereal images in this poem. Is the skylark fully realized as a physical being? If not, how does this relate to the poem’s theme?

Developing Writing Skills

See Handbook: How To Write About Literature, << page 938, Lessons 1-5.

Combining Narration and Exposition. Read lines 86–90 of “To a Skylark.” In a brief composition provide several examples from your own experience of the truth of these lines or write a narrative that illustrates the same point.

Love's Philosophy

The fountains mingle with the river
And the rivers with the Ocean,
The winds of Heaven mix forever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single; 5
All things by a law divine
In one spirit meet and mingle.
Why not I with thine?—

See the mountains kiss high Heaven
And the waves clasp one another; 10
No sister-flower would be forgiven
If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth
And the moonbeams kiss the sea:
What is all this sweet work worth 15
If thou kiss not me?

Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. The word *philosophy* implies a rational argument. What is the lover's reasoning in this poem? What is its unstated premise, or underlying assumption?
2. Does the speaker cite any kind of authority in developing this argument?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Meter.** In scanning this poem, do you find a regular pattern of stressed syllables? What about unstressed syllables? Is the meter trochaic, with each foot comprised of a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable (- ~)? Find a line that is clearly trochaic. What might the meter be called when it varies from the trochaic?
2. **Feminine and Masculine Rhyme.** When rhyme occurs in two consecutive syllables, the second of which is unstressed, it is called feminine rhyme, or

multiple rhyme. When only the final accented syllables rhyme, the rhyme is called masculine or perfect rhyme. Find examples of both feminine and masculine rhyme in this poem. What seems to be the effect of each on the rhythm? Why do you suppose that these patterns came to be called feminine and masculine?

3. **Pathetic Fallacy.** Through personification poets credit nature with human qualities. The portrayal of inanimate nature as having human feelings or character is also known as the pathetic fallacy, especially if it seems false or exaggerated in its emotionalism. The phrase is not always derogatory, however, for response to the pathetic fallacy is partly a matter of taste. Do you find any particularly good examples of the pathetic fallacy in this poem?

4. **Theme.** The virtues of this lyric are mostly superficial; the poem does not invite penetrating analysis or conceal rich thematic complexities. Nevertheless, it does echo a certain Romantic tendency to identify with nature and to see it as a primary source of values. How does this poem illustrate the theme that is worked out more profoundly in "Ode to the West Wind"?