

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
Dr. Merin Simi Raj
Dept of Humanities and Social Science
IIT Madras
Shelley's A Defence of Poetry Part -2

(Refer Slide Time: 00:15)

contain in themselves the elements of verse; being the echo of the eternal music. Nor are those supreme poets, who have employed traditional forms of rhythm on account of the form and action of their subjects, less capable of perceiving and teaching the truth of things, than those who have omitted that form. Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton (to confine ourselves to modern writers) are philosophers of the very loftiest power.

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 catalogue of detached facts, which have no other 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,



Hello and welcome to today's session. We will continue looking at this essay by Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*. So while defending poetry and also trying to show how this is not radically different from the faculty of reason, how, while showing that imagination is as important as reason, as logic, he goes on to talk about, refer to the poets as prophets, as philosophers and how they always had a function to play in the society.

And in that sense, continuing with this discussion, he tries to differentiate between a story and a poem and says, “A story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other 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”.



So, again I want to draw your attention to the earlier equation that he highlights about how something which is expressed in nature is perceived by the poet and then that is again expressed. So this sort of glorification of poetry or all the other art forms, that is something that we see from time immemorial, ever since they started talking about these aspects, these artistic forms and theoretical frameworks.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:27)

images.

Having determined what is poetry, and who are poets, let us proceed to estimate its effects upon society.

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendor of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging & he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations. A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and




So having said that, he also tries to connect this with the idea of delight, the idea of pleasure, which also has been something which has been pursued from the time of Sidney onwards. “Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight”. And this is the section where he proceeds to estimate the effects of poetry upon the society.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:50)

images.

Having determined what is poetry, and who are poets, let us proceed to estimate its effects upon society.

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendor of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations. A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and



And here we find that Shelley is very much interested in drawing our attention to the connection between the poets, poetry and society. Poetry is never seen as something disconnected from society. On the other hand, it is seen as something, a faculty which exists quite in organic unity with society. So, it is in this way that he also counters many of the arguments put forward by Thomas Love Peacock and argues that by placing imagination at the centre of this faculty, this connection is only being highlighted.

There is hardly anything which has been compromised when you are talking about organic unity, which also manifests in its myriad forms when we talk about the connection between poetry and its effect on society. So poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure. He argues, "In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellence of poetry". So the evaluation initially is not based on excellence. On the other hand, "For it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness, and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fullness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers, it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise by many generations". So herein he is talking about how a poet is more often than not, he or she is judged by the posterity.

So most poets do not reach the height of their fame during their lifetime. And he is also talking about how, as and when a poet is writing, as and when the work of art reaches the audience, it is not evaluated on the basis of its excellence, because you need time to look back on the work and also evaluate its effects historically.

So the immediate response to any work of art in that sense is pleasure, it is delight, the excellence is evaluated only at a later point of time when you look back and then evaluate it in the context of its relation with the peers and its historical context.

"A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds, his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why." So there is a way in which he of course places the poet on a Romantic pedestal, like a nightingale who is singing, not knowing why and its effects are perhaps known only at a later point.

And one is also a bit unsure of the kind of audience. If you compare the poet with the nightingale, it is about the nightingale singing for itself to cheer its own solitude. So, look at the interesting ways in which Shelley is placing the poet, as a private being, as an esoteric being, also as someone who is connecting, who is organically connecting with the society around him.

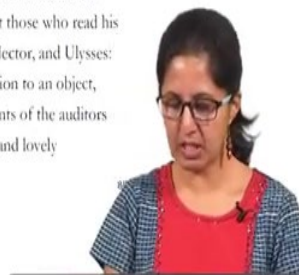
The poet in that sense is a philosopher, is a prophet. The poet is someone who is actively engaging with the society. He is also someone who is doing things for his own pleasure, to cheer his own solitude. So it is in this complex mesh of the private and the public, of the audience and the self that he locates the significance of the poet and the faculty of poetry.

“The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilisation has reposed.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:25)

in all the strength and splendor of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations. A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why. The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilization has reposed. Homer embodied the ideal perfection of his age in human character; nor can we doubt that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses: the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism, and persevering devotion to an object, were unveiled to the depths in these immortal creations: the sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/61388/a-defence-of-poetry>



Homer embodied the ideal perfection of his age and human character, nor can we doubt that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector and Ulysses, the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism and persevering devotion to an object were unveiled to the depths in these immortal creations.

(Refer Time Slide: 05:43)

impersonations, until from admiring they imitated, and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. Nor let it be objected that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they can by no means be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. Every epoch, under names more or less specious, has deified its peculiar errors; Revenge is the naked idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age: and Self-deceit is the veiled image of unknown evil, before which luxury and satiety lie prostrate. But a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty. An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the ancient armor or the modern uniform around his body; whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either. The beauty of the internal nature cannot be so far concealed by its accidental vesture, but that the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise, and indicate the shape it hides from the manner in which it is worn. A majestic form and graceful motions will express themselves through the most barbarous and tasteless costume. Few



The sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations until from admiring, they imitate and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration”. So he's talking about how Homer was also responding to an infant Greece. The instant response was that of delight, that of pleasure. And only at a later point of time, he gets elevated as the greatest poet, as “the poet” whom the classical poets as well as the English critics have always been referring to.

So in that sense, there are two ways in which the evaluation happens. One, there is an immediate response which is that of pleasure, which is that of delight, which is that of sheer happiness, which does not really evaluate the poet on the basis of his effect on the society.

And there is another kind of response which comes at a later point of time where the audience is able to evaluate the writer on account of the effect that his writing had on the society, and also the ways in which the audience begin to relate with the characters which were projected before them, like Achilles or Hector or Ulysses. And this ambition and this desire within the audience to become one like the character, become like those characters, exemplify the qualities that those characters have in those poetical renditions.

But there is also a filter that the poet seems to apply, but the poet considers “the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty”. So that is where the poet becomes very different from a historian perhaps, from a storyteller, perhaps. The poet looks at the vices of his contemporaries, looks at the vices of his historical conditions as merely a

dress and beneath that is the essence of the humanity, essence of the human character which the poet successfully often tries to express in his work.

“An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the ancient armour or the modern uniform around his body, whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either”. So these sort of ways in which the poet responds to the times around him, to the world around him becomes extremely important to talk about the immortality of the poet, immortality of poetry at a later point of time.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:54)

poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conceptions in its naked truth and splendor; and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music for mortal ears.

The whole objection, however, of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself



Now he is responding to this age-old argument that poetry should also edify, all kinds of art forms should also edify. And he is also writing at a point of time where there is a lot of discussion about morality, there is a lot of discussion about what is useful for the society and how the moral ethics or moral fibre of our community could be dictated by the art forms.

So responding to that, in very direct terms, Shelley says, “The whole objection, however, of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man”. So given that Shelley led a very iconoclastic life and there were lot of objections about his personal life, his political alignments, the way in which he responded to the many radical things around his world, his position is extremely interesting.

So he wants to draw this connection between morality and poetry. And let us hear what he has to say about that. “Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But poetry acts in another and diviner manner”.

So here, he is placing, he is continuing to place poetry at a high pedestal, a high philosophical pedestal, a high prophetic pedestal and also here at a high moral pedestal. But the way in which Shelley understands and defines morality is entirely different. It is not in the way in which say, religion would talk about morality or the social ethics would talk about morality. But it is in a higher sense, it is in a very divine sense that he is referring to morality which is a private thing, which finds its manifestation in those public poetic expressions.

So for Shelley, morality is not something which could be dictated by the external forces, it could not be dictated by the institutions of religion or politics or the civic sense, but it is more or less something that comes very divinely from within. And this distinction that he makes between the divine and religion, between the many things that happen inside a human’s mind and the outside institutions, that becomes very central to the definition of poetry in the Romantic age itself.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:03)

science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists. The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our 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 pleasure of his species must become his own. The great

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry>



Now we find very Romantic ideals being discussed over here, such as, “The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our nature and an identification of ourselves with a beautiful,

which exists in thought, action or person not our own. A man to be greatly good, must imagine, intensely and comprehensively”.

So imagination here becomes something very synonymous to morality. A man, if he wants to be really good, he should be able to imagine well, in that sense, someone who is capable of the highest order of imagination is also occupying the highest pedestal in terms of the morality that Shelley defines for himself. “He must put himself in the place of another and of many others, the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own”.

So here, morality becomes something very empathetic for Shelley. It is not something which could be dictated, it is not about the rules and laws, it is not about following a certain moral code. On the other hand morality, for Shelley, in connection with the idea of imagination that he and other Romantic writers project, becomes a very empathetic phenomenon.

So when the poet is capable of putting himself in the place of another and many others, and when he is able to own the pains and pleasures of others in his species, he becomes automatically moral. And there is an inherent morality in this form of imagination which is also very empathetic.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:30)

2/25/2020

A Defence of Poetry by Percy Bysshe Shelley | Poetry Foundation

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 the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign a glory in a participation in the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the eff



“The great instrument”, he continues, “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”. I want you to pay attention to this statement: Poetry enlarges the circumference of the

imagination. Here he means that imagination is a faculty which the human mind already possesses.

What poetry does is to act as a catalyst to enlarge the circumference of this imagination. Poetry merely acts as a tool to exemplify and to articulate this imagination in different forms, empathy being its highest order of finding its articulation through imagination. So 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 the faculty, which is the organ of the moral nature of man in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb”. And these examples are extremely useful over here. And here he continues to focus upon the significance of imagination in accentuating the faculty of morality. And here, we find that contrary to the arguments that the likes of Thomas Love Peacock would put forward, where they try to identify a dichotomous relationship between imagination and reason, here, not only does Shelley bring in a connection, an organic connection between imagination and reason, he also tries to link this with morality, and by extension, with empathy that one feels with fellow human beings.

So poetry in that sense, imagination in that sense become faculty of the highest order, faculty of the highest order where one is talking about really divine things, very fine feelings which are part of human civilisation, that is also a sign of advancement, just like reason is.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:28)

interstices whose void forever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign a glory in a participation in the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose.

Homer and the cyclic poets were followed at a certain interval by the dramatic and lyrical poets of Athens, who flourished contemporaneously with all that is most perfect



Here he also talks about the dangers of having one's own conceptions of right and wrong, because they are usually of one's time and place and in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. So there is an inherent danger in trying to define morality in very narrow terms, which is why, you know, he uses the celebratory form of looking at imagination and morality in almost complimentary terms.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:54)

limb. A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign a glory in a participation in the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose.

Homer and the cyclic poets were followed at a certain interval by the dramatic and lyrical poets of Athens, who flourished contemporaneously with all that is most perfect in the kindred expressions of the poetical faculty; architecture, painting, music, the dance, sculpture, philosophy, and, we may add, the forms of civil life. For although the



And he uses the example of Homer quite generously and compares Homer with that of the lesser poets, in comparison with the ones in whom he thinks the poetical faculty was less intense such as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, because they have frequently affected a moral aim and that is not what Shelley means when he talks about morality. It is not about

targeting a certain sense of morality, which is also in alignment with the time and place where the poet is located.

And the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose. So again think about the analogy of the nightingale over here. There is nothing which is being very overtly targeted, the nightingale sings for itself and also for perhaps the unknown good of the other ones who are listening to him.

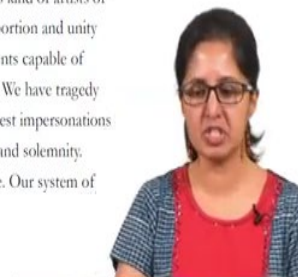
In the same way, the poet first of all has to have a sense of his own morality only then that will be empathetically connected to the ones who are listening to them. So on the other hand, he is also saying that it is not really important to cater, to align one to the morality, the frameworks of morality which is also imposed by account of the time and place within which the poet is placed.

And this sort of alignment might lessen the impact of the poetry, it also makes the poetical faculty less intense like he says, it has in a poet like Spencer, compared to the magnitude of such intensity that you will find in Homer.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:18)

established to distinguish between the cause and the effect.

It was at the period here adverted to that the drama had its birth; and however a succeeding writer may have equalled or surpassed those few great specimens of the Athenian drama which have been preserved to us, it is indisputable that the art itself never was understood or practised according to the true philosophy of it, as at Athens. For the Athenians employed language, action, music, painting, the dance, and religious institutions, to produce a common effect in the representation of the highest idealism of passion and of power; each division in the art was made perfect in its kind of artists of the most consummate skill, and was disciplined into a beautiful proportion and unity one towards the other. On the modern stage a few only of the elements capable of expressing the image of the poet's conception are employed at once. We have tragedy without music and dancing; and music and dancing without the highest impersonations of which they are the fit accompaniment, and both without religion and solemnity. Religious institution has indeed been usually banished from the stage. Our system of



And then he moves on to talk about drama. “It was at the period here adverted to that the drama had its birth; and however, a succeeding writer may have equalled or surpassed those few great specimens of the Athenian drama which have been preserved to us, it is indisputable that the art itself never was understood or practiced according to the true philosophy of it as at Athens”. So what Shelley is trying to do over here is also to take us

through a historical journey, because he is also responding to the ways in which four different historical stages were identified by Thomas Love Peacock.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:54)

life: even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature; error is thus divested of its wilfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice. In a drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect. Neither the eye nor the mind can see itself, unless reflected upon that which it resembles. 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 from the simplicity of these elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.

But in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathizes with that decay. Tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the form of the great masterpieces of antiquity, divested of all harmonious accompaniment of the kindred arts; and often the very form

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry>



And in this context, after having spoken about some of the stellar writers in terms of their dramatic genius, he moves on to say that, “But in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathises with that decay”. And he is again trying to differentiate between poetry and drama.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:25)

2/25/2020

A Defence of Poetry by Percy Bysshe Shelley | Poetry Foundation

misunderstood, or a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines, which the writer considers as moral truths; and which are usually no more than specious flatteries of some gross vice or weakness, with which the author, in common with his auditors, are infected. Hence what has been called the classical and domestic drama. Addison's "Cato" is a specimen of the one, and would it were not superfluous to cite examples of the other! To such purposes poetry cannot be made subservient. Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it. And thus we observe that all dramatic writings of this nature are unimaginative in a singular degree; they affect sentiment and passion, which, divested of imagination, are other names for caprice and appetite. The period in our own history of the grossest degradation of the drama is the reign of Charles II, when all forms in which poetry had been accustomed to be expressed became hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue. Milton stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him. At such periods the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be



“Tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the form of the great masterpieces of antiquity, divested of all harmonious accompaniment of the kindred arts; and often the very form

misunderstood or a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines, which the writer considers as moral truths; and which are usually no more than specious flatteries of some gross vice or weakness, with which the author, in common with his auditors, are infected”.

And this is something that he finds very specific to drama, because drama most often, he thinks, is responding to the times, and poetry in that sense is able to transcend the times. Of course, there is a certain way in which it impacts the society, impacts the historical conditions which he also talks about at length, but drama seems to be more responsive in terms of its immediate responses to the vices of the ages.

And he gives this example: “The period in our own history of the grossest degradation of drama is the reign of Charles II, when all forms in which poetry had been accustomed to be expressed became hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue. Milton stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him”. This is one of the most prolific things written about Milton by the way.

And it talks about how the decay, the moral decay of the times during the reign of Charles II had reflected very directly in the drama of the times. But on the other hand, Milton, being a poet who had the supreme faculty of poetic genius and imagination, he is able to transcend his times and which is why it is the power of poetry and the imagination, Shelley argues that it is through that, that Milton was able to illuminate an age entirely unworthy of him.

So here, he is pushing forward a very important argument that unlike many other art forms, which respond to the age in very direct terms, poetry, in some way or the other, it tries to redeem the age, which is what Milton did. And it could also be said about the later poets, especially the poetry which came out after the two terrible wars- World War I and World War II.

We find that poetry has this infinite capacity to redeem the age of its evils. And this is the power of imagination that Shelley is also talking about over here. “At such periods, the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them. Comedy loses its ideal universality, wit succeeds to humour, we laugh from self-complacency and triumph instead of pleasure, malignity, sarcasm and contempt succeed to sympathetic merriment, we hardly laugh, but we smile.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:03)



they affect sentiment and passion, which, divested of imagination, are other names for caprice and appetite. The period in our own history of the grossest degradation of the drama is the reign of Charles II, when all forms in which poetry had been accustomed to be expressed became hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue. Milton stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him. At such periods the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them. Comedy loses its ideal universality; wit succeeds to humor; we laugh from self-complacency and triumph, instead of pleasure; malignity, sarcasm, and contempt succeed to sympathetic merriment; we hardly laugh, but we smile. Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life, becomes, from the very veil which it assumes, more active if less disgusting; it is a monster for which the corruption of society forever brings forth new food, which it devours in secret.

The drama being that form under which a greater number of modes of expression of poetry are susceptible of being combined than any other, the connection of poetry and



Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life becomes, from the very veil which it assumes, more active if less disgusting. It is a monster for which the corruption of society forever brings forth new food, which it devours in secret”.

There is another thing which I want you to pay attention to over here, though Shelley does not have a framework of morality which could be subscribed to by the general audience, by the society, it is interesting to note that he is entirely disapproving of the Restoration drama, the drama which came out during the reign of Charles II. He finds that morally compromising and he talks about that in terms of the grossest degradation, and Milton is being seen as very elevating.

So we need to keep this in mind that there is a sense of morality by which Shelley is guided as well. It is not dictated by religion, it is not dictated by the societal institutions, but on the other hand, it comes from this divine power of imagination, the power which he continues to accentuate and equate with most Romantic poets.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:56)

external; their incomparable perfection consists in a harmony of the union of all. It is not what the erotic poets have, but what they have not, in which their imperfection consists. It is not inasmuch as they were poets, but inasmuch as they were not poets, that they can be considered with any plausibility as connected with the corruption of their age. Had that corruption availed so as to extinguish in them the sensibility to pleasure, passion, and natural scenery, which is imputed to them as an imperfection, the last triumph of evil would have been achieved. For the end of social corruption is to destroy all sensibility to pleasure; and, therefore, it is corruption. It begins at the imagination and the intellect as at the core, and distributes itself thence as a paralyzing venom, through the affections into the very appetites, until all become a torpid mass in which hardly sense survives. At the approach of such a period, poetry ever addresses itself to those faculties which are the last to be destroyed, and its voice is heard, like the footsteps of Astraea, departing from the world. Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving; it is ever still the light of life; the source of whatever of beautiful or generous or true can have place in an evil time. It will readily be confessed that those



And moving along these lines, he makes another powerful argument which is very important for our discussion over here. “For the end of social corruption is to destroy all sensibility to pleasure; and, therefore, it is corruption”. So when the sensibilities to pleasure is destroyed, that is also a corrupting thing as far as the society is concerned, it is a very different way of looking at corruption, looking at the power of pleasure.

“It begins at the imagination and the intellect as at the core and distributes itself thence as a paralyzing venom through the affections into the very appetites until all become a torpid mass in which hardly sense survives. At the approach of such a period, poetry ever addresses itself to those faculties which are the last to be destroyed, and its voice is heard like the footsteps of Astraea, departing from the world.

Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving; it is ever still the light of life, the source of whatever of beautiful or generous or true can have placed in an evil time”. So here again, he is presenting poetry as a cure, as a moral cure, as something which can cure through sheer pleasure and sheer delight. And pleasure in that sense becomes extremely important within any historical condition to take away the different forms of corruption.

So unlike drama which sort of reflects the decay, which is present in the society, Shelley argues that poetry is capable of rising above that decay and giving a sort of pleasure which will act as a counterforce, which will act almost like an anti-venom to the kind of corruptions

and the kind of evils which are persistent in the society. And that is the kind of morality that he would want to advocate as far as a work of art, as far as poetry is concerned.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:56)

At length the ancient system of religion and manners had fulfilled the circle of its revolutions. And the world would have fallen into utter anarchy and darkness, but that there were found poets among the authors of the Christian and chivalric systems of manners and religion, who created forms of opinion and action never before conceived; which, copied into the imaginations of men, became as generals to the bewildered armies of their thoughts. It is foreign to the present purpose to touch upon the evil produced by these systems: except that we protest, on the ground of the principles already established, that no portion of it can be attributed to the poetry they contain.

It is probable that the poetry of Moses, Job, David, Solomon, and Isaiah had produced a great effect upon the mind of Jesus and his disciples. The scattered fragments preserved to us by the biographers of this extraordinary person are all instinct with the most vivid poetry. But his doctrines seem to have been quickly distorted. At a certain period after the prevalence of a system of opinions founded upon those promulgated by him, the three forms into which Plato had distributed the faculties of mind underwent a sort of



And more importantly, he identifies poetry as something which is capable of changing minds, which is capable of having a great effect on other great minds as well. He gives examples from ancient Greek philosophy, gives examples from Christian history. “It is probable that the poetry of Moses, Job, David, Solomon, and Isaiah had produced a great effect upon the mind of Jesus and his disciples.

The scattered fragments preserved to us by the biographers of this extraordinary person are all instinct with the most vivid poetry”.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:16)

there were found poets among the authors of the Christian and chivalric systems of manners and religion, who created forms of opinion and action never before conceived; which, copied into the imaginations of men, became as generals to the bewildered armies of their thoughts. It is foreign to the present purpose to touch upon the evil produced by these systems: except that we protest, on the ground of the principles already established, that no portion of it can be attributed to the poetry they contain.

It is probable that the poetry of Moses, Job, David, Solomon, and Isaiah had produced a great effect upon the mind of Jesus and his disciples. The scattered fragments preserved to us by the biographers of this extraordinary person are all instinct with the most vivid poetry. But his doctrines seem to have been quickly distorted. At a certain period after the prevalence of a system of opinions founded upon those promulgated by him, the three forms into which Plato had distributed the faculties of mind underwent a sort of apotheosis, and became the object of the worship of the civilized world. Here it is to be confessed that "Light seems to thicken," and



So it is an interesting way in which he uses ancient history, he uses ancient civilisation and philosophy and also the tenets of Christianity. And he focuses on the aspect of imagination, which contributes to a great deal of his understanding of morality and then he talks about how these sort of imaginations of men might have had a great effect upon the great leaders and even God figures such as Jesus or Plato, as he later talks about it.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:46)

three forms into which Plato had distributed the faculties of mind underwent a sort of apotheosis, and became the object of the worship of the civilized world. Here it is to be confessed that "Light seems to thicken," and

The crow makes wing to the rooky wood,
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
And night's black agents to their prey do rouse.

I

But mark how beautiful an order has sprung from the dust and blood of this fierce chaos! how the world, as from a resurrection, balancing itself on the golden wings of Knowledge and of Hope, has reassumed its yet unwearied flight into the heaven of time. Listen to the music, unheard by outward ears, which is as a ceaseless and invisible wind, nourishing its everlasting course with strength and swiftness.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/59388/a-defence-of-poetry>





And in that sense, poetry is also seen as something which will bring in order in a chaotic historical existence, as something which will produce better things, moral things, irrespective of the decay which is deeply embedded in different historical conditions.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:04)

2/25/2020 A Defence of Poetry by Percy Bysshe Shelley | Poetry Foundation

The poetry in the doctrines of Jesus Christ, and the mythology and institutions of the Celtic conquerors of the Roman Empire, outlived the darkness and the convulsions connected with their growth and victory, and blended themselves in a new fabric of manners and opinion. It is an error to impute the ignorance of the dark ages to the Christian doctrines or the predominance of the Celtic nations. Whatever of evil their agencies may have contained sprang from the extinction of the poetical principle, connected with the progress of despotism and superstition. Men, from causes too intricate to be here discussed, had become insensible and selfish: their own will had become feeble, and yet they were its slaves, and thence the slaves of the will of others: lust, fear, avarice, cruelty, and fraud, characterized a race amongst whom no one was to be found capable of creating in form, language, or institution. The moral anomalies of such a state of society are not justly to be charged upon any class of events immediately connected with them, and those events are most entitled to our approbation which could dissolve it most expeditiously. It is unfortunate for those who cannot distinguish



In this sense, in a very broad sense, Shelley is able to identify poetry within everything that is illuminating, within everything that is edifying for human minds, for human civilisation. And accordingly he argues, “The poetry in the doctrines of Jesus Christ, and the mythology and institutions of the Celtic conquerors of the Roman Empire, outlived the darkness and the convulsions connected with their growth and victory and blended themselves in a new fabric of manners and opinion”.

If you look at the biblical history, or the Celtic history that he refers to or the Greek history, there is a lot of violence and bloodshed and a lot of trauma which is also part of those historical conditions. But Shelley, when he is trying to highlight the effect of moral imagination on these great minds, he is also able to push forward this argument quite efficiently that poetry had always been contributing to the advancement of the human mind, that poetry, and by extension imagination, had always been contributing to the progression of human mind, towards better civilisation, towards better thoughts, towards advanced modes of thinking and refined forms of looking at the world.

“It is an error to impute the ignorance of the Dark Ages to the Christian doctrines or the predominance of the Celtic nations. Whatever of evil their agencies may have contained, sprang from the extinction of the poetical principle, connected with the progress of despotism and superstition”. And this is very important, he is very strongly underscoring this idea.

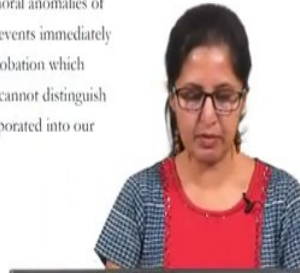
Wherever there is a moral decay, wherever there is a historical decay, he is categorically arguing that, that must have happened only when the poetical principle had extinct. It was not

because of the teachings of the Christian doctrines, it was not because of the evil rulers who came up in Greece or in Rome. It is by and large almost entirely because of the extinction of the poetical principle, connected with the progress of despotism and superstition.

So look at the larger historical framework within which he is situating the significance of imagination, the significance of poetic morality as he refers to it.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:18)

connected with their growth and victory, and blended themselves in a new fabric of manners and opinion. It is an error to impute the ignorance of the dark ages to the Christian doctrines or the predominance of the Celtic nations. Whatever of evil their agencies may have contained sprang from the extinction of the poetical principle, connected with the progress of despotism and superstition. Men, from causes too intricate to be here discussed, had become insensible and selfish: their own will had become feeble, and yet they were its slaves, and thence the slaves of the will of others: lust, fear, avarice, cruelty, and fraud, characterized a race amongst whom no one was to be found capable of creating in form, language, or institution. The moral anomalies of such a state of society are not justly to be charged upon any class of events immediately connected with them, and those events are most entitled to our approbation which could dissolve it most expeditiously. It is unfortunate for those who cannot distinguish words from thoughts, that many of these anomalies have been incorporated into our popular religion.





So, “The moral anomalies of such a state of society are not justly to be charged upon any class of events, immediately connected with them and those events are most entitled to our approbation, which could dissolve it most expeditiously. It is unfortunate for those who cannot distinguish words from thoughts and many of these anomalies have been incorporated into our popular religion”.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:39)

connected with them, and those events are most entitled to our approbation which could dissolve it most expeditiously. It is unfortunate for those who cannot distinguish words from thoughts, that many of these anomalies have been incorporated into our popular religion.

It was not until the eleventh century that the effects of the poetry of the Christian and chivalric systems began to manifest themselves. The principle of equality had been discovered and applied by Plato in his *Republic* as the theoretical rule of the mode in which the materials of pleasure and of power produced by the common skill and labor of human beings ought to be distributed among them. The limitations of this rule were asserted by him to be determined only by the sensibility of each, or the utility to result all. Plato, following the doctrines of Timæus and Pythagoras, taught also a moral and intellectual system of doctrine, comprehending at once the past, the present, and the future condition of man. Jesus Christ divulged the sacred and eternal truths contained these views to mankind, and Christianity, in its abstract purity, became the exoteric



And having shown how significant the poetical faculty is for advancing civilisation, how significant this sort of a morality which is very empathetic in nature, how significant this is for rescuing and redeeming the decaying civilisations, he then moves on to talk about the political aspects of poetry as well where he also talks very centrally about slavery and he makes a lot of commentaries about the vices which he sees around him as well.

So we will wrap up this discussion for today. And I thank you for your time and attention, and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.