

# Reflections on Shelley's Poetry in the Light of his *A Defense of Poetry* Essay: Does the Poet Have a Divine Power?

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## **Abstract**

Percy Bysshe Shelley was stimulated to write his greatest well-known work of prose, a *Defense of Poetry*. Shelly was highly provoked by a friend "Thomas Peacock", who criticized the modern poetry and prompted Shelley to write his zealous defense where he questions whether a poet is a philosopher or a rational thinker? He also states that poetry's main focus is to reveal the exquisiteness of the world that is deceptively concealed in our busy world of ambiguity and darkness. Moreover, Shelley presents the poet as a person who has a considerate, mystical gratitude to nature; the poet has the authority to interpret the indefinite and hidden or unhurt certainties with the virtue of his individuality and heavenly supremacy he enjoys.

**Keywords:** *Poetry, Poet, Defense, Imagination, Divine Power*

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote his essay "A Defense of Poetry" in 1821. In this essay Shelley insists that the creation of poetry is not a mere craft that anyone who fancies that he is able to produce poetry can do it. Rather, the genuine poet is a creative, inspiring dreamer who is able to accumulate all his imagination and abnormal qualities as a means of creating art and enlightening the world of the unknown. Shelley, in his essay, states that imagination is the power of inspiration that formulates the vision of the

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poet, who cannot be created by automatic writing or trained as a craftsman. Moreover, he argues that poetry is not only a practice of imagination but also is an expansion and a source of empathy, understanding, passion and love. He writes:

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.

As we shall observe by deeper reading of his masterpiece essay "A Defense of Poetry" and with its expressiveness, we shall understand that it mainly describes the qualities of both poetry and the creator of it. His defense of these two concepts i.e. the poet and his poetical talent or as he calls it "poetical faculty" is a great representation of the vision and dream of the creator of the imagination which ultimately leads to the production of a masterpiece poem that reveals and embodies deep passion and feelings of its writer who tries to reflect on the society he is living at.

Commencing by a deep insight of the essay, it starts with an elegant introduction about the nature and perception of poetry, though some of the critics claim that it lacks cohesion and coherence of the main stream of his thoughts, Shelley, undoubtedly, succeeded in symbolizing his notion of the poet who represents an idealistic vision of the art to the extent that it reaches a divine power that competes the qualities of the creator of the universe. Shelley through the utilization of the imaginative and innovative process of the poet's talent used neat language that reflected the divine ability of the poet who is able with his abstract qualities and characteristics along with being able to utilize the aesthetic effects of his production to reach the peak of passion and beauty and this was highly stressed throughout the whole essay. In one of his masterpiece poems "Ode to Liberty" Shelley's imagination is demonstrated in a very magnificent manner:

And many a warrior-peopled citadel,  
Like rocks which fire lifts out of the flat deep,  
Arose in sacred Italy,  
Frowning over the tempestuous sea  
Of kings, and priests, and slaves, in tower-crowned majesty;

The core essence of the essay is to reflect the main stream vision of poetry as he writes “poetry is ever-accompanied with pleasure and it lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world”. According to Shelley poetry’s main focus is to reveal the exquisiteness of the world that is deceptively concealed in our busy world of ambiguity and darkness. Later he stresses the main crux of his essay which is “poetry acts in a diviner manner”. He claims that poetry’s purpose is not just to generate moral perfection but also to stimulates and arouses the mind to conquer and dive in deep uncertain areas of passion and blends of beliefs.

He crystalizes his view by emphasizing that poetry’s abilities is to decode the stereotypes and challenge the already-static and typical prejudices adopted by the society. This adaptation of the attitude would give the reader an opportunity to perceive the so-called truth from a completely different perspective. Poetry is the messenger or the mediator that have the divine power to uncover and expose these underlying truths and this reminds me with the Utopia and how Plato argued that a poet is to be a genuine creator not an imitator to assist the humans see the truth beyond the physical values they appreciate. Likewise, Shelley discusses that the poet is able and entitled to expose the corruption of the material physical world and lead the humans to the mere truth that is hindered by the short-sight assessment and beliefs imposed by the authoritative and dictating society.

From another different dimension, Shelley suggest that there must be a balance between proper goodness and the power of imagination “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause”. Thus, his aim is to bridge this gap between the reader and poetry by digging deep in the cause utilizing the power of imagination. Subsequently, the reader will start adopting the art the poet produces immediately after admiring it, where he writes “poets

are as mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself” and this also is a unique feature of Shelley’s poetry that saves the reader the knowledge and esteem to impersonate nature through self-reflection and understanding. According to Shelley’s understanding, poetry is not an imitation of nature that aims at delighting and pleasing readers. He writes one of the most critical sentences in this regard saying “a great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight”. This seconds the belief that a poet in Shelley’s perspective is not a normal man he has unique qualities and merits that empower him with a divine power that leads him to utilize his creativity and imagination to create genuine products rather than imitating the imitation of the material world.

Going deeper in the text and the flow of the ideas, Shelley takes the reader to another different spot where he states that tragedy is the best source of poetry “sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself”, ironically, tragedy is the best form to reveal and uncover the concealed pleasure that blends, naturally, with grief and sorrow. Interestingly, the other sources of pleasure such as love and joy are not excluded or disregarded in his ideas but the paradox of, or the juxtaposition of pleasure and pain in the form of a tragic poem is a unique feature that he offered in the essay, stating that tragedy is a core genre that a poet should master specifically to stimulate and awaken commanding emotion and feelings among the readers. Thus, he simply lay emphasis on the universality that welds that reader with the tragic experience that is not away from his real life and that leads by return to the creation of delight and pleasure.

Is the poet a philosopher or a rational thinker? Shelley argues that the world has been stunned by reasonable thinking, and poetry “creates new materials of knowledge, and power and pleasure”. He delicately explicates that the “poetical faculty” is characterized by a divine power. He writes “poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of will”. This shall take us to a deeper insight of the religious context of the essay and Shelley himself. It is well-known that Shelley was an atheist and he was proud of this. He denied all divine power to the extent that he wrote on this topic in 1811, “The Necessity of Atheism” which was a treatise on atheism in which he confirms that there is no God. Interestingly, that Shelley’s doctrine is evidently conflicting the view of God in Christianity.

Shelley felt profoundly uncertain about structured creed, predominantly Christianity. However he frequently embodies the poet as a symbol or the character of a prophet mainly Christ, in other words, he represents the poet as a replacement for Jesus. He presents the poet as a martyred of the society and the values of traditions and conventions. Jesus is revived by the supremacy of nature and his peculiar fancy is disseminated by his farsighted prophecies. For Shelley, Christ is a symbol and a representation of the romantic poets and himself as well.

Shelley's attempted to demonstrate that a poet cannot appreciate his own production and to what extent it will be famous and worthy among the readers. The poet is a nightingale in Shelley's opinion "a nightingale, which sits in the darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds". Then he goes further to claim that "poets are prophets". Therefore, for Shelley a poet is someone dignified and has the superiority over the others. A poet is a person who has abnormal abilities and is revered and gifted with unique merits and qualities.

Shelley's ideas on poets' super characteristics and his argument on their superiority are questionable as he lacks the rational logic of reasoning and the proof to maintain the idea that societies would elevate poets and their art. His claim, on the other hand, that poets are the greatest and their distinction is not analogous with any other as he writes poets are "institutor of human life" he also is not convincing in his reasoning as it lack rational proof that defends his assumption of elevating poets to the level of wise men and to consider them the institutors of life. Shelley believes that poets are dependable; nonetheless, a poet is regarded in a glorious status and is beheld to have a divine power that supports him to produce his creative and innovative poetry. Shelley's poet appears to have little control over his gifts to create poetry or appreciate what he has generated.

The poet mind is "a fading coal" and his production is an outcome of inspiration, therefore, when a poet creates his mind and imagination is being inspired by his own super power that distinguishes him from others. Shelley writes that "the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet". As the poetry is being created, the inspiration or

originality is slowly declining. However, if the poet is never fully conscious of the brilliance of his poems, or even in control of the muse or generation of his poetry, how is the poetry ever being attributed to its unique outset? Shelley perceives a poet as a person who functions as a container of some superior heavenly and divine expression who has little competence or consciousness of the inspired talent intricate with the conception of the art. The poet's work is the "record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds" which hints that the person who reads to trust the poet who does have some sentient adoptions in his effort of producing and original form of creativity and novelty. However, this may oppose Shelley's aforementioned concepts of the poet. Shelley aims to boost the paramount poets as "men of the most spotless virtue". It is undoubtedly agreed and well perceived that a poet is a person who should have righteous and honorable features of his life. However, Shelley and in his essay is perplexing and confusing the readers by stating that "spotless virtue" of the poet which is a choice of extremism is the main feature of a genuine poet. Whereas, in prior arguments he writes: "the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire"

Such contradictions may lead the person who reads to feel a slightly misled when Shelley earlier states that the poet's mind is rebelling "base" wishes. The degree of the words is what makes the person who reads quail since the word "base" has a very undesirable implication and "virtue" has a constructive inference. Shelley's recklessness to designate the gorgeous outcome of poetry and its originator denies his earlier delineated beliefs. The feebleness Shelley's argument begins to gleam through his stunning expressions and images.

Going back to the idea how such a perception of the poet would affect the framing of poetry understanding in Shelley's perspective. Poetry swiftly is converted from the talent that boosted the shroud to expose the attractiveness of the world. It aims to reveal the outcome of the poet that reserves not only the antiquity of the world but also the lovely and beautiful connotations and inclinations of the word. Then it is altered into something that he writes about saying: "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".

A very shocking image is presented to the poet in the depth of the essay as Shelley claims that the poet is no longer interested in uncovering the exposing the corruption and venality of the society but sometimes he tends to disguise it and not attempting to reveal it particularly when such a truth is completely deformed and would lead to uncovering the hidden contradiction of the society. The poet tends, in his poetry, not only to reveal the hidden beauty of the world but also to maintain exquisiteness and truth. Moreover, he has the ability to manipulate things that are not so inspirational into charm. Shelley is now challenging Plato's arguments and perceptions of truth. Shelley argues that the poet no longer discloses the venality but guises it if it is too distorted to ascertain the concealed beauty which would only sustain Plato's apprehensions of the ethics of poets to ruin the truth by generating another malformed copy of the already despoiled material world.

Shelley aims at indicating that poetry is, unquestionably, something virtually too godlike and imperceptible, it not man or prophet "poet" who could conceivably have created it could have well-ordered the determination to craft it. This perception of the concept of poetry and its originator is enormously persuasively and divinely inscribed, picturing glowing imageries of a lovely work that generates astounding and heavenly talent. This talent of creating genuine art would in turn moves the sentiments of people and divulges numerous effects about the world the readers live in.

Inopportunately, Shelley's stunning and articulate works cannot fur the feebleness of his assertions, opinions, and philosophy entirely. The cohesiveness of his thoughts and ideas that poetry contributes to the world and those inhabiting this world, since the poet has a unique merit that enables him see through the physical world to expose and uncover the uncertain and ambiguous truth. Tactlessly, Shelley's essay is unable to crystalize or enforce such ideas with more than theorizing what he is proposing; he does not have a clear track or vision of what poetry does or supposed to be doing and he cannot truthfully or coherently designate a solid description of the qualities of the poet. There are numerous arguments within his thoughts and philosophies that challenge one another and he does not maintain reasonable thinking or indication to provide a provision of his assertions. His imageries are rather intangible or "divine"

characteristics to both poems and its originator leading the person who reads to have faith in that these two effects are somehow above everyone else or should be dignified above any other work.

It can be said that the dominant apprehensions of Shelley's poems are fundamentally matching subject matters that demarcated Romanticism, exclusively amongst the earlier English poets of his era: exquisiteness, the desires, nature, political freedom, inspiration, and the purity of imagination. What makes his handling of these subject matters exceptional is his theoretical connection with his theme, which was better established and expressed than any other poet of the romanticism school at his era. Moreover, Shelley's personality, which was astonishingly delicate and approachable even for an idealistic poet, and which haunted an unexpected dimensions for pleasure, affection, and hopefulness. Shelley passionately thought in the likelihood of comprehending the superiority of human joy as grounded on magnificence, and his instants of obscurity and hopelessness, which are clear especially in a number of his long poems virtually continuously commence from his discontent at understanding and comprehending the ultimate forgone flaw.

When compared to his peers at his era, it is known that Keats supposed that both beauty and aesthetic are appreciated for the sake of beauty and aesthetic, whereas Shelley's passionate state of mind about exquisiteness and manifestation of beauty are recognized in his work of genius poems; "Ode to the West Wind" and "To a Skylark," in which Shelley summons images from the beauty of nature to portray his affiliation to his talent and products of poetry. Shelley, unlike other poets of his era, underlined the association between loveliness and heavens, or thought enthusiastically in the influence of art's sentimental and emotional effects summarized in the theme of joy to recover the world and its societies. Shelley is certain of that poetry creates a sort of people and humanity that is much more better; he believes that poetry is immersed with this gentle sort of stimulated honorable brilliance, which he anticipated that would shake his readers sentimentally, mystically, and magically.

To sum up, it can be observed that in Shelley's poetry, the character of the poet or Shelley himself is not merely a gifted performer or writer or even

a sensitive philosopher but rather an exceptional, heart-rending, prophetic hero with a visionary and divine insight. Shelley presented the poet as a person who has a thoughtful, spiritual indebtedness to nature; the poet has the supremacy to decode the unknown and unrevealed or untouched truths with the virtue of his uniqueness and divine power he enjoys. Through imagination the poet is able to do what others cannot and even can do more than a prophet can do. Thus, his poetry develops to be with the divine power of the prophet to be a sort of divination and prophecy to the world, and through his verses, a poet has the power and authority to not only create but also inspire change of the whole world for the better and to generate civil, collective, and divine transformation. According to Shelley, a poet is a redeemer, a savior a knight in shining armor; who has the capacity to use the divine power in saving the world. Like Christ, the poet is destined to grieve and is doomed to be burned to enlighten others. A poet has the idealistic and visionary power that distinguishes him from a normal man because he is victimized by an oppressive rule, or for the reason that they are stifled by conservative creed and middle-class standards. In the end, nevertheless, the poet conquers for the reason that his fine art is memorable, enduring the domination of control, conviction, and civilization to motivate fresh groups of the inspired society.

Finally, Shelley uses nature as his chief cradle of elegiac creativeness. In his poems as “The Mask of Anarchy” and “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley advocates that the regular world clutches an inspirational supremacy over his imagination. This supremacy appears to come from an unfamiliar person, more spiritual place than merely his thankfulness for nature’s exquisiteness or magnificence. Captivatingly, though nature has imaginative clout over Shelley because it is a source of creativeness, he touches that his thoughts have inventive influence over nature. It is the fancy or the capacity to constitute sensual insights that makes us able to designate nature in diverse, innovative concepts and methods, which help to outline how nature look like and, consequently, how it subsists. As a consequence, the influence of the social awareness becomes equivalent to the authority of nature, and the understanding of prettiness in the natural world converts to be a sort of partnership between the person who perceives and the one who is alleged. For the reason that Shelley cannot be sure that the magnificent influences he feels in nature are only the consequence

of his exceptional thoughts, he claims that it is hard to appoint nature's guidance to only one God. The poet has a genuine role in shaping the beauty and novelty of such a divine source of power.

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