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Shelley, the Mythmaker

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Abstract:

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) has used and created myths in his poems. Mythmaking involves attributing human qualities to the nature and natural elements. Shelley's powerful imagination has attributed nature and natural elements with human qualities. At the same time he does not distort scientific truths about nature. The nature keeps its own features intact. There lies the excellency of poetic creation of P.B. Shelley. Incidentally his poems can be justified poetically, mythologically, scientifically and naturally. This article focuses on the works of Shelley's imagination to create myths out of nature and natural elements in his poems like **The Cloud, To the Skylark, Ode to the West Wind, To the Moon.**

Keywords : myth, imagination, mythmaker, nature, personification.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was 'one of that second generation of Romantic poets that did not live to be old and respectable.' He was born on August 4, 1792 and died on July 8, 1822. Within the available life span of the poet he has created a different world within the world of Romantic poetry. 'In some respects he is the Romantic poet par excellence, his strange and brief life with its eccentric unworldliness, his moods of ecstasy and languor, his high mythopoeic imagination, his swooning idealism, combining to form a popular image of romanticism' (Daiches :907). His powerful imagination has given new shapes to the elements of nature. Though his revolutionary spirit has been combined with this, it is a unique dimension that characterizes his poems. Natural objects and elements have been humanized and spirited in his poems. It creates beauty on one hand and myth on the other hand.

In the process of mythmaking nature and its elements are endowed with some attributes of human beings and animals. According to the nature of its origin myth may be of two kinds : one is derived from classical epics and mythologies and folklores and the other is refreshingly original, created by the individual poet in the spur of the moment by his poetic imagination. Shelley has made use of both the types of myths in his poetry. He applies classical mythological elements in his poetry by referencing frequently and he himself has created myths out of the natural elements. The most significant fact is that Shelley does not distort scientific truths. According to him, the west wind, night, moon, skylark and cloud remain natural elements. They retain their own features in spite of their mythical colouring.

In this article I shall discuss how Shelley exposes his imagination to mythmaking in the poems *The Cloud* (1820), *To a Skylark* (1820), *Ode to the West Wind* (1820) and *To the Moon* (1820). *The Cloud* is a wonderful illustration of Shelley's myth-making power. Shelley here personifies the cloud and turns it into an immortal minor divinity. He endows it the features of nymphs in classic

mythology. The poet looks upon the cloud as a living being. So we find the cloud to function as a gardener watering flowers:

“I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and the streams;...” (“The Cloud”:1-2)

as a mother providing “light shade” for her child from the sun when he takes a nap:

“I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noonday dreams.” (“The Cloud”:2-4)

as a bird moving its wings to drop down the dew on “the sweet buds”:

“From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds everyone,...” (“The Cloud”:3-4)

The credibility of the myth has been enhanced by the autobiographical and scientific presentation:-

“ I am the daughter of Earth and water,
And the nursling of the sky;
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;
I change, but I can not die.” (“The Cloud”:73-76)

Stopford Augustus Brooke says about this poem, “It is not only a myth of the cloud;the cloud is accompanied by a host of other impersonations of nature –the sanguine sunrise with his meteor eyes, the orbéd maiden of the moon, the imprisoned giant of the thunder, the lightning which runs through the sky to find his love-all are touched into life, and yet there is not one phrase, not one adjective which is contradictory of , or which does not illuminate natural fact.” (Brooke : 150). In the poem Shelley refers to the rotation of the earth around the sun when he depicts the dance of the cloud “about the sun”.

In *Ode to the West Wind* the natural phenomenon the wind is transformed into a living powerful spirit by the magic of Shelly’s powerful imagination. The wind performs some charming tasks on the three spheres land ,water, and sky. In the first section of the poem the west wind has been given the identity of ‘Autumn’s being’. To mythicize the wind it has been called ‘unseen presence’. Invisibly the wind drives the dead leaves and a significant image has been used to reinforce the activity of the wind. The wind is compared with the enchanter who by his magic incantation drives away the ghosts.It also ‘chariotest to their dark wintry bed the winged seeds’ to be rejuvenated later. The west wind has an ‘azure sister’ whose voice is like a clarion. It runs over the whole earth to awaken it. The wind has been called the destroyer and preserver of life, a special quality that the gods and goddesses are supposed to possess in mythology. So in the first section of the poem the presence of a powerful force is ascertained.

In the second section and the third section the west wind shows more activities on the sky and the water, on the sky it takes the form of a fierce Maenad whose wonderful and fearful dance creates a mysterious atmosphere in the mind of the readers.Shelley like other Romantic poets was fond of classical mythology and was acquainted with the story of the Greek god of wine and revelry, Bacchus. Maenads are the female followers of Bacchus. They are represented as women with dishevelled hair and garlands of ivy. The loose disturbed clouds overhanging the sky are like hair of some fierce Maenad:

“...Thou on whose stream, ‘mid the steep sky’s commotion,
Loose clouds like earth’s decaying leaves are shed,

Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,
 Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
 On the blue surface of thine airy surge,
 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head
 Of some fierce Maenad,....” (“Ode to the West Wind”:15-21)

Not only the silent pictures of the phenomena but the sound has also been used to increase the being we search in the west wind when Shelley calls the west wind, “Thou dirge/of the dying year...”

The West Wind wakes up the dreamy sea. The sea which is ‘The blue Mediterranean’ has also been personified. It has been taken as an idle masculine entity. Shelley addresses the sea to describe its calm atmosphere in such way:

“ ...Where he lay

Lull’d by the coil of his crystalline streams,...”(“Ode to the West Wind”:30-31)

The Mediterranean sea ‘saw in sleep old palaces and towers’ that quivered long past. Side by side the waves of the sea ‘cleave themselves into chasms’ to make room for the west wind. And ‘the oozy woods’ become sapless fearing the west wind. Though actually Shelley justifies the science here. The foliage of the ocean is sapless because they do not get the touch of sunlight and soil of the earth. Just as human beings become pale in fear, with the suspension of blood circulation in the body, so the sea plants are supposed to become grey as they listen to the voice of the storm. Thus the elements of nature are invested with the human qualities.

In *To a Skylark* Shelley imagines the bird as a divine being. The bird is denied its birdship. At the very beginning the poet addresses the skylark in such way:-

“Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!

Bird thou never wert;...” (“To a Skylark”:1-2)

The bird is equated with a joyful spirit. Its spontaneous song is a surprise to the poet. Like the mythological gods and goddesses the skylark is a heavenly being and invisible. Its mysterious performance has been enhanced impressively through a series of images. The skylark is compared with the moon during the day, with a poet hidden in the light of thought, with a high-born maiden confined in a palace tower , with a glow-worm scattering soft light un beholden , with a rose scattering sweet fragrance under the cover of green leaves. Thus the images weave a kaleidoscopic pattern within a unified impression. Shelley’s mythopoeic imagination works in a complex way as is best exemplified in the poem *The Cloud*. He separates the bird from the earthly creatures though it retains some best human qualities. The bird’s ethereal existence is emphasized again and again by comparing it with the star and the moon. Its upward journey is like the journey of the gods and goddesses on chariot towards Heaven. The bird’s voice comes from a world where there is no pain. So the dwellers of Heaven in eternal peace are recalled through the invisible existence of the bird. The poet’s imagination searches for the source of the lark’s unalloyed joy. The poet is convinced of the skylark’s capacity of thinking, feeling and deducing conclusions like human beings. So the poet asks:-

“What objects are the fountains?

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?"("To a Skylark":71-75)
 Finally Shelley attributes the bird with the quality of a teacher who can teach man how to obtain gladness:-

"Teach me half thy gladness..." ("To a Skylark":101)

Thus nature as Wordsworth believed plays a role to soothe human soul. Shelley also comes to that point while imploring as such.

The moon, a unique existence, in nature very often became favourite to Shelley. The description of the moon in his poem '*To the Moon*' has been given mythologically. Shelley's high imagination gives the moon a beautiful identity. The moon has been imagined a beautiful love laden lady who is constantly moving on the sky and searching for companions. But the constancy of the moon is not provided with any eligible lover's passions. The moon is humanized in a lively way bringing closer to day to day relationship of human beings. Her passions, longings, desires are depicted vividly. She can feel the weariness; she can gaze on the earth. Her eyes can feel the human conditions and become joyless in sad situation. The expressions, 'pale for weariness', 'wandering companionless', 'joyless eye' are examples of personifications. Natural elements have become human elements in Shelley's poetry. It may be said that the poem is a myth of moon.

Myth is almost ubiquitous in Shelley's works. The four poems that I discussed have the sky as their common domain where the performers, the Cloud, the West Wind, the Skylark and the Moon avail abundant space for exercising their presence. The Sky with its vastness enhances the mythical possibilities which such natural elements need to imprint the magic spell on readers of Shelley's poetry.

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