

# Non-Violence Resistance through Revolution of Opinions: Reflections on P.B. Shelley's Poem "The Masque of Anarchy"

## Abstract

Literature works as a magic wand to generate new ideas which can inspire us to make our earth a better place to live. It empowers us with hope; passion and strength that we need to create a better future for all humanity. No doubt, literature makes us think meticulously and question ourselves: do we believe that our visions about peaceful world are meaningless and irrelevant? Or should we let the world do what it's going to do? Is it justifiable to give everything in the hands of leaders who don't care in the least about preserving us or our world, leaders whom we don't trust and over whom we have no control? Should we accept that violence and war are inevitable? Or should we take up the noble endeavour to talk to common people, to sing and to write songs for the common people about peace? In the present paper, my humble endeavour is to underscore the power of the lyrics which prepare us to understand the deep connections between non-violence and peace. Exploring the relationship between aesthetics and politics in P.B. Shelley's lyric *The Masque of Anarchy*, the paper attempts to underline the power of poetry which can bring revolution of opinions.

**Keywords:** Non-violence, Aesthetics, Resistance.

## Introduction

"The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is poetry... the words linger in the memory over generations. And if the words carry revolutionary ideas, those ideas are communicated in poems far more thoroughly than in prose, in conversation or even in slogans"

P.B. Shelley (*A Defense of Poetry*)

Art works even the most aggressive, stand for non-violence because of the inherent freedom from the workaday bustle and the practical individual, back of which is concealed the barbaric appetite of the species, which is not human as long as it permits itself to be ruled by this appetite and fused with domination"

Theodor Adorno (*Aesthetic Theory*)

Both Shelley and Adorno look at works of art as the nucleus of forces that can move the world. *We just need to keep on reading and to allow the tremendous power of literature to enter our hearts and to lead us to noble path of peace and harmony.* The Australian poet A.D. Hope, who usually regarded poetry and politics as separate, wrote at the time of the Vietnam conflict "Inscription for a War." That poem includes the lines:

"We are the young they drafted out  
For wars their follies brought about  
Go tell those old men, safe in bed  
We took their orders and are dead"

Although such examples of nonviolent initiatives appear to refer to activities that occurred at one point in time, the biographies of the protesters show their fascination with the philosophy and language of nonviolence over long periods. Among English poets, P.B. Shelley is the most radical in his ideology and this can be traced in his poetry. The present paper attempts to analyze Shelley's poem *The Masque of Anarchy* which has long been associated with non-violence or one of its approximate cognates, "passive resistance" or "civil disobedience". It has been called 'perhaps the first modern statement of the principle of nonviolent resistance.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*,



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Timothy Morton has emphasized the power of this lyric that Henry David Thoreau's civil disobedience and Gandhi's passive resistance were influenced by Shelley's appeal for nonviolence in protest and political action in his *The Masque of Anarchy*. Written on the occasion of the Massacre at Manchester in 1819, (known as Peterloo Massacre) the poem reflects Shelley's political consciousness. He elaborates on the psychological consequences of violence met with pacifism. He appeals that the people should "Stand ... calm and resolute," with "folded arms and steady eyes," and thus shame the cruel rulers. It beckons hope in the people to return to the more natural and fair "old laws of England," drawing on "science, poetry, and thought." Exploring the human quest for peace and harmony in English poetry, the present paper intends to analyze Shelley's poetic appeal for non-violence resistance in *The Masque of Anarchy*.

The poem bears witness to the fact that the poets are the secret movers and shakers of global politics. This poem has sparked some of the most sweeping historical changes of the past two centuries. The poem was written in response to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which British troops attacked a defenseless crowd of citizen protesters. The poet urges the "Men of England" to rise up—and stand still—against tyranny:

*Stand ye calm and resolute,  
Like a forest close and mute,  
With folded arms and looks which are  
Weapons of unvanquished war,  
And let Panic, who out speeds  
The career of armed steeds  
Pass a disregarded shade  
Through your phalanx undismayed.*

This war-cry is more on the order of Gandhi than the French revolutionaries, however, for it calls for virtuous principles and non-violence in the face of the violent ruling powers. To quote Martin Luther King's Acceptance Speech, on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, December 10, 1964,

"Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time - the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression. Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation."

Violence cannot be an effective remedy to abolish exploitation. As Boserup and Mac comments: "Violence is condemned because it causes unnecessary suffering, dehumanises and brutalises both the victim and the executioner, and only brings short-term solutions (Boserup and Mack, 13). Writing

in the same vein, Shelley appeals that people should "Stand ... calm and resolute," with "folded arms and steady eyes," and thus shame the rulers into retreating in the face of the deep and wide strength of the British people. "Rise like lions" thus beckons hope in the people to return to the more natural and fair "old laws of England," drawing on "science, poetry, and thought." This poem is a rare representation, for Shelley, of ceaseless transformation without agony." The theme of agonizing transformation has appeared in several of Shelley's poems like *England in 1819* and *Ode to the West Wind*, which invoke death or revolt as prerequisites for change. Shelley continues the theme of revolution in *The Mask of Anarchy*, and manages to make a nonviolent revolt at least as violent as the revolutions he describes in other poems. Shelley urges the English people to refrain from seeking 'blood for blood', but to instead use their numbers, their words, and the laws of England as weapons against the tyrants he censures in the opening stanzas of the poem. I'd like to point out how very fitting it is for Shelley, who in this poem is using words to spark rebellion, to encourage others to start a revolution with words. In his appeal, Shelley uses the metaphor to weaponize language.

This lyric offers one important innovation: it's a description of a nonviolent protest, written before the term had ever been used or the tactic ever attempted. Although this poem isn't read or taught much these days, but when it was first published in 1832, it reached an audience on both sides of the Atlantic. One of its American readers was Henry David Thoreau, who had it in mind when, in the late 1840s, he wrote "Civil Disobedience"—the first great prose formulation of the concept of nonviolent resistance. Thoreau's essay, in turn, was taken up by Tolstoy, whose book *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* spread a Christianized version of the concept to millions of fervent readers.

In the twentieth century, Gandhi, a leader deeply influenced by Tolstoy, Thoreau and Shelly appeared on the scene and he often recited Shelley's poem to his own 'vast assemblies'.

*The Mask of Anarchy* (1819), which is to be analyzed in this paper, is a good example of Shelley's political consciousness. It was written on the occasion of the Massacre at Manchester in 1819, known as Peterloo Riots when, on August 16<sup>th</sup>, the cavalry was sent by the government to break up a concentration of frame workers that had gathered to demand the reform of parliamentary representation. The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 had resulted in periods of famine and chronic unemployment, exacerbated by the introduction of the first of the Corn Laws. By the beginning of 1819 the pressure generated by poor economic conditions, coupled with the lack of suffrage in northern England, had enhanced the appeal of political radicalism. In response, the Manchester Patriotic Union, a group agitating for parliamentary reform, organized a demonstration to be addressed by the well-known radical orator Henry Hunt.

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Shortly after the meeting began, local magistrates called on the military authorities to arrest Hunt and several others on the hustings with him, and to disperse the crowd. Cavalry charged into the crowd with sabres drawn, and in the ensuing confusion, 15 people were killed and 400–700 were injured. The massacre was given the name Peterloo in ironic comparison to the Battle of Waterloo, which had taken place four years earlier. Historian Robert Poole has called the Peterloo Massacre one of the defining moments of its age. In its own time, the London and national papers shared the horror felt in the Manchester region, but Peterloo's immediate effect was to cause the government to crack down on reform, with the passing of what became known as the Six Acts.

In *The Masque of Anarchy* Shelley elaborates on the psychological consequences of violence met with pacifism. Shelley was in Italy at the time. When he received news of the incident, he was outraged. In his call for freedom, his poem is considered to be the first modern statement of the principle of nonviolent resistance. The poem begins with the speaker, sleeping in Italy, is awoken by a voice from England who summons him back to his home nation to witness a massacre that has recently taken place. It was characterized by anarchic murder rather than a true spirit of revolution. He personifies Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy, various Destructions, and Anarchy leads armed forces through England, scaring the population. Soon, the "seven bloodhounds" get to England, where they massacre the innocent public. They continue to butcher the innocent as they travel through the land, eventually reaching London, where the "dwellers," who are by this time aware of the havoc these masked tyrants are running, are "panic-stricken" and attempt to run away. Shelley points out that the institutions in which people are encouraged to place their trust and faith are the very ones that are out to "trample" them. While the people of England continue to worship their King, they are unable to see the anarchist behind the mask.

While the group of "glorious triumphant" masqueraders continue to travel across England, intoxicated with their successful brutality and their power over their blind subjects, Shelley continues to refer to the wickedness of the ruling authorities being worshipped in England (such as at lines 69-73). Anarchy, so the argument goes, has been made King and employs his slaves to overtake the establishments of London. It is here that the tone of the poem begins to change from utter despair to a glimmer of optimism. The character "Hope," who is almost completely defeated, lies down in the path of Anarchy, imploring natural spirits to rescue her before she, too, is "piled with the dust of death." The spirit that begins to rise comes from nature, a "mist," and Shelley completely shifts the dark mood of the poem, to one with a small light of possibility. The next five or six stanzas are full of this "image" taking on the deeper power of nature as a source of greater power than that of man ("as flowers," "as stars," "as waves").

The poet never leaves the specific situation of England, calling its situation "dim" but not entirely "expired." The speaker argues that the only way to liberty is through reason, the salvation of science and intellect, not through made-up powers of religion and monarchy. Instead of trading "blood for blood" and "wrong for wrong," the people should finally turn back to justice, wisdom, peace, and love in order to achieve liberty. They should be guided by "Science, Poetry, and Thought" and quiet virtues. The true revolution should be "measured" and use words instead of swords, drawing on the "old laws of England" instead of the new laws of the oppressors. Years after Shelley, the same power of words and negotiation was stressed by Martin Luther King Jr. He wrote in a letter from Birmingham Jail:

"Negotiation ... is the purpose of nonviolent direct action. ... Nonviolent action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored" (King, 88).

Martin Luther King Jr.'s description of the purpose of his struggle for racial equality in the United States presents Non-violent resistance as a precursor, or catalyst, to conflict transformation. If "negotiation is only possible when the needs and interests of all those involved and affected by the conflict are legitimated and articulated" (Lederach, 14), then nonviolent struggle is its necessary complement, by helping marginalized communities to achieve sufficient leverage for an effective negotiation process.

When the tyrants fight back, the people should let their anger show itself until the tyrants fall back in shame. In *Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley calls for a justified "assembly" of rulers to watch over the English land, where the "workhouses" and "prisons" are treated just as "palaces."

Shelley's emotionally polemic poem is intended to further the cause of governmental reform, an issue that was dividing England at the time. Some of the reform efforts Shelley advocated were expanded suffrage and greater freedom of speech, press, and assembly. The poem supports these causes by metaphorically elaborating on the concepts of tyranny and liberty, describing the effects of each in concrete, poignant images. In simple yet searing language the poem vehemently denounces tyranny as exploitative and as going against the very laws of nature.

Liberty, however, is a God-given right of every person. Living by the precepts of liberty will ensure a happier, more fruitful existence.

Liberty is seen in concrete and practical terms. The poem avoids any abstraction that would make freedom seem unrealistic and overly idealistic, a "superstition" doomed "soon to pass away." On the contrary, freedom is ". . . bread, / and a comely table spread." It provides for the very necessities of life, clothing and food, things denied under tyranny.

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Freedom is also associated with justice, providing for "righteous laws" that would forbid the kind of exploitation allowed by tyranny. Here one can see that Shelley did not advocate lawless revolution. Liberty does not mean the freedom to ignore law, but the establishment of equitable law.

*What is Freedom? Ye can tell  
That which Slavery is too well,  
For its very name has grown  
To an echo of your own  
Let a vast assembly be,  
And with great solemnity  
Declare with measured words, that ye  
Are, as God has made ye, free!  
The old laws of England--they  
Whose reverend heads with age are grey,  
Children of a wiser day;  
And whose solemn voice must be  
Thine own echo--Liberty!*

Lawlessness would be no improvement over tyranny. In fact, the masquerade of tyrants and the poem's title itself show that Shelley equates tyranny with anarchy. Tyranny creates gross inequities that will inevitably cause revolution and anarchy. Shelley warns of this by reminding the reader of France ("Gaul" in stanza 59), where injustice led to bloody revolution and to a more malevolent tyranny under Napoleon. This is not a call for violent revolution or bloody revenge, but a plea for "righteous law" as suits the wisdom and reason of liberty. Shelley created such a horrifying vision of tyranny that its antithesis—liberty—seems society's only legitimate haven. To quote Mathew C. Borushko,

" *The Mask* dramatizes the necessity of integrating aesthetic experience and political practice in order to achieve the critical self-reflection required for non-violent praxis, and it focuses on the uniquely inherent relationship between non-violence and the aesthetic."

The foregoing discussion can be summed up with an often-quoted statement by Shelley: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world". Not surprisingly, this claim has earned some snickers from people who think of poets as barely able to legislate their own grooming habits. But Shelley was speaking metaphorically, of course, and also fairly broadly; his general point was that language is the decisive force in human affairs.

Culture, religion, and politics derive from narrative, myth, and rhetoric—and all of these things derive from poetry. Literature is often reduced in the general public's eyes to a quaint academic pursuit, or a noble but remote spiritual undertaking, or a single specialty "genre" among many. The present paper underlines the need to think of literature as an underground cultural wellspring that bubbles up everywhere .

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