

**English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832**  
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**Romantic Poetry 3- Aesthetics Shelley**

Hello everybody. As we continue with the English Romantic writers and their employment of aesthetics, we have looked at Williams Wordsworth and we have looked at William Blake. Today in this session, we will look at Percy Shelley.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:27)

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters—with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume,  
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.  
Shelley, *Mont Blanc*



I will begin with a slide up there, Mont Blanc, an excerpt from the poem, a landscape poem, poem which clearly implies sublime aesthetics.

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark-now glittering-now reflecting gloom-  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings.

And what is the tribute? He will say, the tribute brings

Of waters-with a sound but half its own,  
Such a feeble brook will oft assume

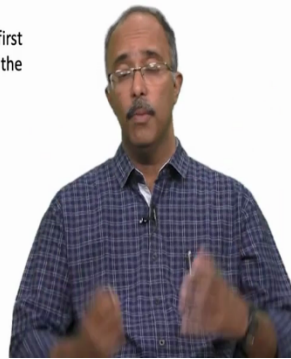
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
Where woods and wind content, and if a vast river  
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:12)

Shelley suggests that the "universe of things" (which is his name for all things external to the human mind) flow through the passive universal mind, as a great river flows through a ravine.

The River Arve which comes down from Mont Blanc is first compared to the universal mind, and the River Arve itself to the "universe of things".

But slowly, Shelley's speaker suggests that his own mind is wild:



Shelley suggests that the universe of things which is basically Shelley's term for all things external to the human mind flow through the passive universal mind. So if you recall what we have said about Wordsworth and others and we had a little discussion about Coleridge's Aeolian harp and the image of the mind as a harp, so the mind is passive, an instrument. When the wind, the universal wind flows through this mind, it activates the mind.

So as we discussed in our earlier session, Coleridge was a little unhappy at the idea that the human mind is just passive. You need a mind which is energetic, which is dynamic. So that was Coleridge but Wordsworth will also speak because these are people working with the organic idea the idea of organic unity. Wordsworth would also speak about the sense sublime as we just saw a while ago in an earlier session. Shelley is suggesting that the universe of things flows through the passive universal mind just as a river flows through ravine.

The River Arve which comes down from the Mont Blanc is first compared to the universal mind and the river itself to the universe of things. Slowly, like Coleridge, Shelley's speaker will change this stance and will suggest that the mind is also wild. It is not the river that is wild, it is

not the mountain which is sublime but the mind which is sublime, the imagination which is sublime and he will say this, coming up on your screen now, next slide, accepting Mont Blanc.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:46)

Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee  
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around;  
One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings  
Now float above thy darkness, and now rest  
Where that or thou art no unbidden guest,  
In the still cave of the witch Poesy,



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With the clear universe of things around;  
One legion of wild thoughts.

Note here. The wildness is not out there. It is not nature that is wild. Wildness is in the mind.

One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings  
Now float about thy darkness, and now rest  
Where that or thou art no unbidden guests,  
In the still cave of the witch Poesy

(Refer Slide Time: 3:24)

Shelley believes that active impressions impinge on a passive universal mind. It is in the interactions between mind and matter that a third category, the human mind, evolves.

In order to make this argument, Shelley invokes the sublime.



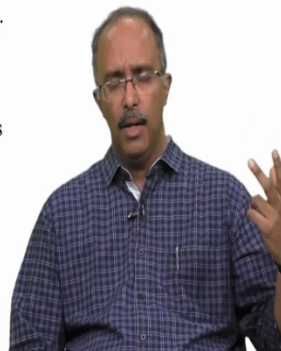
Shelley believes that the active impressions impinge on a passive universal mind. It is in the interactions between mind and matter that a third category, the human mind, evolves. In order to make this argument that the human mind evolves between, in interaction between mind and matter, in order to make this argument, Shelley will invoke the sublime.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:49)

He speaks of related matters: the River Arve is terrifying in its power, its mobility and sheer volume.

Proceeding from this is the awareness of the extent and power of the “universe of things”, that is the Natural world. In other words, Shelley’s speaker’s passive mind is overwhelmed by the universe of things.

But the speaker is not defeated by this sublime. Rather, it is in the “unremitting interchange/With the clear universe of things around” that the speaker’s own “legion of wild thoughts” emerges.



He speaks of related matters: the River is terrifying in its power, its mobility and sheer volume. So it is rushing through the ravine and you can almost sense, two senses at work- oral as in what

you hear the river as charging down and the noise you hear and of course the image of waters rushing. Proceeding from this is awareness of the extent and power of the universe of things. That is a natural world. In other words, Shelley's speaker's passive mind is overwhelmed by the universe of things.

But the speaker is not defeated by the sublime. Rather, it is in the unremitting interchange with the clear universe of things around that the speaker's own legion of wild thoughts emerges.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:32)

Now that he has the legion of wild thoughts, the speaker uncovers the meaning of Mont Blanc.

In other words, the sublimity of the world/Nature is what enables the speaker to expand his consciousness (not unlike Blake's arguments about the sublime, as noted earlier).

Shelley writes:



And now that he has the legion of wild wild thoughts, the speaker uncovers the true meaning of Mont Blanc. So initially in the poem, the suggestion is that he is overwhelmed by what he is seeing and everything is out there huge, sublime, incomprehensible. But now that wildness has been internalised and there is a wild thought all set of wild thoughts in his head, he is able to uncover the meaning of Mont Blanc.

The sublimity of the world, of nature is what enables the speaker to expand this consciousness. In other words, the sublimity of nature is matched or paralleled by the sublimity of the human mind or more specifically, the poet's mind. This is what Shelley writes.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:16)

So solemn, so serene, that man may be,  
But for such faith, with Nature reconcil'd;  
Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.



Coming up on your slide now, continuing with Mont Blanc.

So solemn, so serene, that man may be,  
But for such faith, with Nature reconciled;  
Thou hast a wise, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:33)

The voice and meaning, he says, is not understood by all,  
only by a few.

That is, the sublime renders many overwhelmed by awe,  
fear and speechless terror, it defeats the sense of  
comprehension.

Yet for some, it is the source of meaning itself.

But the meaning itself is sublime, and we can only  
recognize the limits of our understanding, as Shelley will  
now propose in Section IV.

First, Shelley's speaker will discover the meaning of all  
life...



Interesting, is not it? Shelley does not that everybody will understand the mountain. It is for some. Like Wordsworth, like others, Shelley is a romantic who also situates the poetic mind as having something special and is above the other minds, other common minds like yours and mine. The voice and meaning cannot be understood by all, only by a select few. The sublime renders many overwhelmed by awe, fear and speechless terror, but for some the sublime is a source of meaning.

Think about this. For ordinary folks like you and me, the sublime generates terror but for people with a more refined mind like poets, the sublime is a source of meaning. So the meaning itself is sublime and the imagination is sublime. That is what he will propose. Shelley's speaker will discover the meaning of life. Coming up next on your slide, a later section of Shelley's Mont Blanc.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:29)

The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,  
Ocean, and all the living things that dwell  
Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,  
Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,  
The torpor of the year when feeble dreams  
Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep  
Holds every future leaf and flower; the bound  
With which from that detested trance they leap;  
The works and ways of man, their death and birth,  
And that of him and all that his may be;  
All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell.



This is what he will say.

The fields, the Lakes, the forest, and the streams,  
Ocean, and all the living things that dwell  
Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,  
Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,  
The torpor of the year when feeble dreams  
Visit the hidden birds, or dreamless sleep  
Holds every future leaf and flower; the bound  
With which from the detested trance they leap;  
The works and ways of man, their death and birth,  
And that of him and all that his maybe;  
All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.



(Refer Slide Time: 7:15)

Mutability – this is what sublime Nature, embodied in the wild regions of Mont Blanc teaches.

Yet there is something more...



Can you imagine what he is talking about here? (( ))(7:16) is talking about here. He is talking about a theme that has obsessed right as fright from Edwin Spencer downwards and on which theme Shelley has a poem of the same title. Mutability-this is what sublime nature, embodied in the wild regions of Mont Blanc teaches. Yet there is something more.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:39)

Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible:  
And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,  
On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains  
Teach the adverting mind.



Continuing on your slide, an excerpt again from Mont Blanc.

Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,

Remote, serene, and inaccessible:

And this, the naked countenance of Earth,

On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains

Teach the adverting mind.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:53)

Shelley casts this lesson of mutability, of the endless power of something we cannot even comprehend ('Power' that is 'inaccessible' is how he puts it) in sublime terms again.

The rest of Section IV is a reiteration of this...



Shelley casts this lesson of mutability, of the endless power of something we cannot even comprehend. As he has already said, power that is inaccessible he says in sublime terms again. That is, the power of something we cannot comprehend has to be sublime. And the rest of section 4 is a reiteration of this. Here it is next on your slide.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:13)

The race

Of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling  
Vanish, like smoke before the tempest's stream,  
And their place is not known. Below, vast caves  
Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,  
Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling  
Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,  
The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever  
Rolls its loud waters to the ocean-waves,  
Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.



The race of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling

Managed, like smoke before the tempest's stream

And their place is not known. Below, vast caves

Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam

Which from those sacred chasms in tumult welling

Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,

The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever

Rolls its loud waters to the ocean waves,

Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:41)

'The power is there', says the speaker about the top of the mountain.

While the mountain is the source of all senses, there is nothing one can see *on* the mountain itself:



The power is there since the speaker about top of the mountain. He just gestures at it, this is what it is. The mountain is a source of all senses. There is nothing one can see on the mountain itself. But it generates the ability to see. As he puts it, here it is next on your slide.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:55)

The still and solemn power of many sights,  
And many sounds, and much of life and death.  
In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,  
In the lone glare of day, the snows descend  
Upon that Mountain; *none beholds them there,*



The still and solemn power of many sights. That is what you acquire. You acquire the still and solemn power of sights. So it is in the mountain that is sublime, the mountain energises your mind to be able to see the sublime.

So the still and solemn power of many sights and many sounds and much of life and death. In the calm darkness of the moonless nights, in the lone glare of day, the snows descend upon that mountain; none beholds them there.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:21)

At the top, there is an unseen power who may not be interested in human beings at all. If so, we are back at the sublime, beyond knowing and beyond caring.

But Shelley does not stop at this. He turns the question of knowledge and the 'meaning' back into the human concern with the human mind.



At the top of the mountain, there is an unseen power he says who may not be interested in human beings at all. If so, we are back at the sublime, beyond knowing and beyond caring. But Shelley does not stop at this.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:33)

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?



He asks, and whatever thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, if to the human minds imaginings  
silence and solitude were vacancy? That is how the poem concludes.

(Refer Slide Time 9:43)

If "silence and solitude" of sublime spaces such as Mont Blanc were only "vacancy" to the "human mind's imaginings" then man would be overwhelmed by the mountain.

What Shelley proposes is something different. The human imagination has the power to interpret the vastness, blankness and wilderness of the mountain.

That is, if the mountain has value only because it serves as a trope, a metaphor for human minds, then how is it as a mountain? In other words, if all sublime Nature is finally subject to the human mind, which tropes, thematizes it, makes it stand for (symbolize) then which is truly sublime: the universe of things or the human mind?



That is, if silence and solitude are sublime spaces such as that of Mont Blanc, where only vacancy if they are vacant to the human mind, then none would be overwhelmed by the mountain. In other words, what he is saying is, if the silence and solitude of sublime spaces such as Mont Blanc but only vacancies, they did not appeal to the human mind and the human imagination, man would be overwhelmed by it. But what Shelley is proposing is something different.

The human imagination has the power to interpret the vastness, blankness and wildness of the mountain. That is, if the mountain has value only because it serves as a trope, or a metaphor for human minds, then how is it as a mountain at all? In other words, if all sublime Nature is finally subject to the human mind, then what is truly sublime? The universe of things or the human mind? That is a question, is not it? That if it overwhelms us, it does not work. But if the mind is able to capture this, then which is sublime? The mountain for the mind?

(Refer Slide Time: 10:48)

Shelley is not worried about the sublime blankness of the mountain top, or the absence of God. What worries him is the absence of imagination (vacancy).

Nature is sublime only when mankind's imagination fails to work, to not see and recognize.

When mankind's mind works on even things as vast as the sublime Mont Blanc, it creates meaning.



Shelley is not worried about the sublime blankness of the mountain or the absence of God. What worries him is the absence of imagination and you will recall Coleridge's dejection in Ode, you will recall Coleridge's Aeolian harp in which he starts worrying. He says, I see but do not see. Coleridge is not worried that there is beautiful nature out there. He is worried that he is not able to understand that nature, perceive the nature.

So Coleridge and Shelley here are both worrying about the loss of imagination. Nature is sublime in other words only when mankind's imagination fails to work because the only thing truly sublime is the mind. Shelley's sublime connects to both Coleridge's and that of William Blake. It is the mind that is the key component. It is ability to imagine, that is the key component.

So there is a mountain, yes. It has passed a range of effects on you, including terror and awe but that is not the true point. The big point is its imagination that allows you to comprehend anything, to take in anything. So the true sublime actually exists in the poet's mind. For ordinary people, no. But here again, as you know, Shelley is distinguishing with ordinary minds and poetic minds. Poetic minds are sublime. Thank you.