



جامعة تكريت

كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

قسم اللغة الانكليزية

Romantic poetry

Revolutionary Imagination, Myth, and Human Liberation

الادب الانكليزي / ماجستير

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2025-2026

Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) stands as one of the most visionary and intellectually ambitious poets of the Romantic period. Unlike Wordsworth, who sought wisdom in nature and memory, or Byron, whose poetry often reflects skepticism and irony, Shelley believed in the transformative power of imagination to reshape both the individual and society. He viewed poetry not merely as artistic expression but as a force capable of inspiring political, moral, and spiritual revolution.

Shelley's poetry reflects the central Romantic ideals of freedom, imagination, and resistance to oppression. However, he extends these ideals into a broader philosophical project aimed at human liberation. His works frequently challenge political tyranny, religious dogmatism, social inequality, and intellectual conformity.

This lecture examines two of Shelley's most important works: **To a Skylark** and **Prometheus Unbound**. Together, these texts illustrate Shelley's belief in imagination as a revolutionary force and reveal how myth can be used to express political and spiritual aspirations. The lecture also incorporates M. H. Abrams' discussion of **Prometheus Unbound** as an example of Romantic myth-making and visionary literature.

Shelley and Romantic Idealism

Shelley is often described as the most idealistic of the Romantic poets.

Several key principles define his thought:

- * Faith in human perfectibility
- * Opposition to tyranny and oppression
- * Celebration of imagination
- * Belief in social progress
- * Hope for universal freedom
- * Confidence in the transformative power of poetry

Unlike many writers who viewed human nature pessimistically, Shelley believed that social institutions—not humanity itself—were primarily responsible for suffering.

According to Shelley, oppressive systems corrupt human potential. If these systems could be transformed, humanity could achieve greater freedom, justice, and happiness. This optimistic vision underlies much of his poetry.

Poetry as a Revolutionary Force

Shelley regarded poetry as more than entertainment.

In his essay **A Defence of Poetry**, he famously argues that:

> "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

This statement does not mean that poets create laws.

Rather, Shelley believed that poetry shapes moral consciousness, expands imagination, and encourages empathy.

For Shelley:

- * Political change begins with imaginative change.
- * Social transformation requires new ways of thinking.
- * Poetry helps people envision alternative realities.

Thus, literature becomes a powerful instrument of cultural and political renewal.

To a Skylark

Written in 1820, *To a Skylark* is one of Shelley's most celebrated lyric poems.

The poem describes the speaker's encounter with a skylark singing high in the sky

The bird itself remains largely invisible.

The speaker hears its song but cannot fully perceive its physical presence.

This separation between sight and sound transforms the skylark into a symbol of transcendence and ideal beauty.

The Skylark as a Symbol

The skylark represents several interconnected ideas:

- * Pure joy
- * Imagination
- * Artistic inspiration
- * Spiritual freedom
- * Ideal existence

Unlike human beings, the skylark appears free from:

- * Suffering
- * Anxiety
- * Regret
- * Fear of death

Its song seems spontaneous, natural, and perfect.

Throughout the poem, Shelley compares the skylark to:

- * A poet
- * A star
- * A rose

* A maiden

* A spirit

These comparisons emphasize the bird's extraordinary nature and its connection to beauty and creativity.

Human Limitation and the Desire for Transcendence

A central theme of the poem is the contrast between human experience and the skylark's apparent perfection.

Human life is characterized by:

* Pain

* Loss

* Mortality

* Disappointment

Even moments of happiness are shadowed by awareness of suffering.

The skylark, however, appears untouched by these limitations.

The speaker therefore longs to learn from the bird.

He asks:

> "Teach me half the gladness"

This request reveals Shelley's belief that poetry and imagination can elevate human consciousness, even if complete transcendence remains impossible.

Poetry and Inspiration

The skylark also functions as a metaphor for the poet.

Like the skylark:

* The poet creates beauty.

* The poet inspires others.

* The poet communicates experiences that transcend ordinary language.

Yet Shelley acknowledges the limitations of artistic expression.

Human language can never fully capture ideal beauty.

The poem therefore dramatizes both the power and the limitations of poetry itself.

Prometheus Unbound

Shelley's Greatest Visionary Work

While **To a Skylark** is a lyric poem, **Prometheus Unbound** is a vast lyrical drama and Shelley's most ambitious work.

Written between 1818 and 1820, the drama reinterprets the Greek myth of Prometheus. In classical mythology, Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to humanity. As punishment, Zeus (Jupiter in Roman mythology) condemns him to eternal suffering. Shelley transforms this myth into a symbolic narrative about political, spiritual, and social liberation.

Prometheus as the Romantic Hero

In Shelley's version, Prometheus becomes a symbol of:

- * Resistance to tyranny
- * Intellectual freedom
- * Moral courage
- * Human progress

Unlike traditional heroes who rely on violence, Prometheus resists oppression through endurance, compassion, and moral strength. He refuses to submit to Jupiter's authority. His suffering represents the suffering of all oppressed humanity.

Consequently, Prometheus emerges as one of Romantic literature's most important revolutionary figures.

Jupiter as Tyranny

Jupiter symbolizes all forms of oppressive power.

He represents:

- * Political despotism
- * Religious authoritarianism
- * Social hierarchy
- * Intellectual repression

Shelley deliberately broadens Jupiter's significance.

The character becomes a universal symbol of domination.

The conflict between Prometheus and Jupiter therefore transcends mythology and reflects real struggles against injustice and oppression.