Chapter IX

CONCLUSION

Of all the Romantic poets Shelley is the most misunderstood and of all the ideas of Shelley, his idea of evil is the most misconstrued. In this connection Carl Graho rightly observes, "Shelley has never been wholly understood; has indeed, for the most part been thoroughly misunderstood." A careful and chronological study of Shelley's works will show that he had something positive to say about the problem of evil and that what he said was sensible and relevant, his minor inconsistencies notwithstanding. It seems that quite a large number of critics of his age and of the age succeeding conspired not to praise Shelley and if at all to praise him, to do so for wrong reasons. Their concerted action yielded result and for about a century they could turn a majority of the English people allergic, at times hostile, to Shelley. Thanks to the perseverance of a galaxy of critics of the twentieth century, Shelley has, to a great extent, been freed from the haze the earlier critics deliberately placed around him and consequently of late Shelley has been recognized as one of the major poets of English literature and as one of the best thinkers of all ages.

1 Carl Graho, op.cit., p.V.
Though the brief span of his life and the entire output of his poetical works show signs of his preoccupation with the problem of evil, Shelley, however, did not suggest any definite and fixed source for the origin of evil, nor did he suggest any clear cut method for its eradication. He delved deep into any plausible source of evil, urged people to accept it as the source but did not hesitate to discard his own earlier belief as soon as some new and more reasonable explanation came to his ken. The sincerity of Shelley lies in the fact that he never minced matters and whatever he sincerely believed at any stage, he expressed in unequivocal terms. Thus his changing position armed his opponents to charge him with immaturity and inconsistency and adolescence.

To appreciate Shelley's changing position, to be more precise, his shift of focus, about the identification of evil better, we have divided his literary career into five consecutive chronological phases for the sake of convenience keeping in mind that such compartmentalization of the works of a creative and developing artist might often lead to disastrous consequences.

Shelley's poetry of the first phase (1800-1811) shows that the young poet became conscious of the presence of evil all around as he was well aware of the harm that the man-made institutions -- social, political and religious-- had been doing to the ignorant, innocent and backward masses. He himself had to experience various forms of evil in the form of parental tyranny, social oppression and religious persecution. And consequently his poetry
of the period is a young man's expression of his abhorrence of tyrannical institutions such as monarchy, aristocracy and Christianity. But since he was not well-aware of the currents and cross-currents of social forces, he went on groping in the dark attacking lesser evils vigorously and often ignoring deeper ones. His romantic nature and adventurous disposition set his tone at a higher pitch and made it over-enthusiastic in denouncing evil and this over-enthusiasm in turn tended to obscure his thought. His poetry of the first phase bubbles with reforming zeal, republican sympathy and egalitarian thought. He just touches the fringe of evil.

The composition of *The Necessity of Atheism* was a turning point of Shelley's career since as a sequel to this he was summarily expelled from the Oxford University. It may be said that this single incident was of immense importance in deciding the future course of Shelley's life as the shock of this abrupt cessation of his university career was too much for him and he for the first time shockingly realized that the world was more formidable and less amenable to reason. The poetical works of the second phase (1812-1814) are replete with bitterness against and scathing attacks on man-made institutions and yet there are discernible the undercurrents of hope for a bright future as well as such shades of thought as reformism, humanitarianism, socialism, feminism and necessitarianism. Influences of Thomas Paine and William Godwin are discernible to a great extent in the works of Shelley at this period. It will be no exaggeration to say that the whole range of his mature ideas in his later
phase are present in germination in the poetry of the first two phases.

During the third phase (1815-1817) Shelley travelled widely and obtained first-hand experience and objective knowledge of various shades of evil of which he had been subjectively aware from before. Notwithstanding some inconsistencies the poetry of this phase shows a promise of progressive maturity. New ideas are surging in his mind and he feels that poets can, and they should, inspire people to raise their voice against tyranny; that decay of despotism ushers in liberty; that love is the most potent and motivating force in man's life; that Beauty gives grace and truth to the unquiet dream of life; that there is a constant struggle between the forces of good and those of evil; that freedom of men is meaningless without the corresponding freedom of women; and that loveless marriage is a miserable evil.

The poetry of the fourth phase (1818-1819) registers a qualitative change because in March 1818 Shelley left for Italy and there his poetic gift reached a lofty height and became truly philosophical. The poetry of this phase shows richness and variety of thought: selfishness and self-centredness cause misery and endanger liberty; love without marriage is better than marriage without love; evil can be and should be eliminated by the act of the will; national prosperity is a great hoax without freedom and for the achievement of freedom sacrifice and suffering are must; peaceful means should normally be followed but when circumstances demand, violent and revolutionary methods should be adopted.
The fifth and the last phase (1820-1822) is the most matured and philosophical so far as the thought content of Shelley's poetry is concerned. It seems as if Shelley had some premonition of his imminent death. The main threads of his thought during this phase are: Liberty is the panacea for many forms of evil; ignorance of liberty amounts to barbarity and will and wisdom determine the extent of true liberty; power of thought is of utmost importance for the redemption of the world; there is no wealth other than the labour of labourers and masses are the real builders of national wealth; love has the singular power of ushering in unity and peace in society; there is an unending struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed, the exploiters and the exploited, the haves and the have-nots; circumstances go a long way in shaping the destiny of men and in making them what they are; the existing religious political systems are ineffective in properly guiding mankind; and there is a constant conflict between 'power' and 'will'.

His first long poem Queen Mab does not offer a very satisfactory identification of the origin of evil. For doing that he needed enough philosophy and that would have seemed too much to expect of a young man of that age. Initially he felt frustrated as it appeared to him that of all creatures inhabiting the globe only man was an outcaste as he did not fit in the grand design of the unspoilt Nature. Interestingly enough the yesterday of man was all bright and good because he was an essential part of the grand scheme of Nature but his today is all dark and evil because, unlike other creatures, he has deliberately deviated from the
path of Nature. Shelley squarely blames the man-made institutions like monarchy and priesthood for this deviation and consequent degeneration of man. These institutions, under the pretext of doing permanent good to man, deliberately keep them ignorant so that they might remain foolishly complacent with their fallen state. Shelley was of the firm conviction that "if man could shed his ignorance and superstition, the ills of capitalism, priesthood, and tyranny could not long endure." 2

At the time of writing Queen Mab, several incongruous philosophical doctrines, the result of his wide reading from eclectic sources, were surging in his mind. Each of these theories has some influence in shaping his notion of evil. "Naturalism aided by sentimentalism supplied the ideas that nature and man are inherently good, and evil is an accidental thing due to man's departure from the ways of nature; for example in the matter of flesh-eating". 3 Shelley's juvenile vegetarian tracts prove that Shelley attributed evil propensities in man to the unnatural food habit of flesh eating. 4

Being fully sincere in his preaching; Shelley himself gave up flesh-eating in March 1812 and remained a strict vegetarian throughout the

4 He slays the lamb that looks him in the face,
And horribly devours his mangled flesh,
Which, still avenging nature's broken law,
Kindled all putrid humours in his frame,
All evil passions, and all vain belief;
Hatred despair, and loathing in his mind;
The germs of misery, death, disease and crime.
(Queen Mab, VII, 211-218)
rest of his life. In his treatise A Vindication of Natural Diet, Shelley writes: "Man and the animals whom he has infected with his society, or depraved by his dominion, are alone diseased. The wild hog, the mouflon, the bison and the wolf are perfectly exempt from malady, and invariably die either from external violence, or natural old age. But the domestic hog, the sheep, the cow, and the dog are subject to an incredible variety of distempers; and like the corruptors of their nature, have physicians who thrive upon their miseries." And then raising the question "How can the advantages of intellect and civilisations be reconciled with the liberty and pure pleasures of natural life," Shelley immediately answers: "I believe that abstinence from animal food and spirituous liquors would in a great measure capacitate us from the solution of this important question."

Shelley's early poems show that he could not take evil very seriously because he looked upon it as external and transient. Man's evil stage was mostly because of the wrong and injustice that had been imposed from outside. In Queen Mab Shelley attacks kings, priests, statesmen, and such other drones and parasites for ushering in and perpetuating the various shades of evil. They are the persons who are directly responsible for the slavery of the mob because they maintain their privileged position by exploiting the weak.

5 A Vindication of Natural Diet, Clark ed. p.83.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
Probing deeply about human depravity Shelley opined that extreme social inequality corrupts and debases man. Odd distribution of money is the root of many evils. Reasonable and rational distribution of money will go a long way in doing away with various types of evil. "The descendants of the greatest prince would then be entitled to no more respect than the son of a peasant. There would be no pomp and no parade; but that which the rich now keep to themselves would then be distributed among the people. None would be in magnificence, but the superfluities then taken from the rich would be sufficient when spread abroad to make every one comfortable. No lover would then be false to his mistress, no mistress could desert her lover. No friend would play false; no rents, no debts, no taxes, no frauds of any kind would disturb the general happiness; good as they would be, wise as they would be, they would be daily getting better and wiser. No beggars would exist, nor any of those wretched women who are now reduced to a state of the most horrible misery and vice by men whose wealth make them villainous and hardened; no thieves or murderers, because poverty would never drive men to take away comforts from another when he had enough for himself. Vice and misery, pomp and poverty, power and obedience would then be banished altogether."

Though Shelley was very much influenced by Rousseau as is evidenced by his stand on man's primitive innocence and original goodness, Shelley never favoured Rousseau's condemnation of civilization and knowledge.

"... Shelley did not share Rousseau's conviction that knowledge and

8 An Address to the Irish People, Clark ed., pp. 51-52.
civilisation have worked the corruption. In fact, Shelley said, Rousseau's description of the noble savage, like Christ's injunction to be as the birds and the lilies, is merely an effective and dramatic way of teaching nobler views of human nature and destiny. Nothing could exceed the misery and squalor of savages in a primitive state. Equality, justice, and knowledge are the associated fruits of higher civilisation."^9

The Christian concept of original sin and man's subsequent fall from the state of blissful ignorance never appealed to Shelley. On the contrary, he opined that degeneration of mankind is to be traced to the unnatural political institutions. Shelley readily agreed with the radical empiricists that character is the product of circumstances, particularly early circumstance. In the review of Frankenstein Shelley maintained the position that initially Frankenstein was good but it was the corrupt society which turned him a misanthrope by treating him as an 'abortion and anomaly'. As the unnatural circumstances of his existence "became developed in action, his original goodness was gradually turned into inexpungible misanthropy and revenge."^10 Similar factors hold good for all men. "The villain is not society in itself nor civilization nor the advancing knowledge which graces both. It is the corrupted and distorting institutions which have not kept up with the general progress of civilisation. These defective forms blight men from birth."^11 But in

10 Review of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Clark ed., p.308.
one of his letters he wrote, "You say that equality is unattainable, so will I observe is perfection; yet they both symbolise in their nature, they both demand that an unremitting tendency towards themselves should be made, and the nearer society approaches towards this point the happier will it be." In another letter addressed to Hogg Shelley wrote in an apparently dejected mood, "Any very satisfactory general reform is I fear impracticable, human nature taken in the mass, if we compare it with instances of individual virtue is corrupt beyond all hope... is it right that of these the world should be composed? Certainly not, were the evil to be obviated -- but it is not to be obviated; all essays of benevolent reformists have failed. Any step however small towards such obviation is however good, as it tends to produce that which the impos(sible) yet were it pos(sible) wd. be desirable." These letters appear inconsistent with Shelley's inherent optimism and were the outcome of a period of his mental tension because then he was a bit dazzled with the possibility of the advent of the utopia and he ignored the real obstacle. "The French Revolution demonstrated how social movements, incontestably good in intention and favourable in early development, ultimately may produce evils of bloodlust and anarchy which seem worse than the despotism they overthrow. Energy produces ruin."  

In terms of the environmental branch of psychology evil within is the result of exposure to evil without. "Men become what they behold, and they may feed on ugliness and poison as well as beauty and truth.

14 Gerald McNiece, op. cit., p. 155.
But men also act; evil passions can create their objects as well as good ones.... There is a degenerative as well as a progressive tendency loose in the world.\textsuperscript{15} As Prometheus says on seeing the Furies

\begin{quote}
Whilst I behold such execrable shapes,  
Methinks I grow like what I contemplate. \\
\textit{(Prometheus Unbound, Act I, 449-450)}
\end{quote}

In \textit{Prometheus Unbound}, Shelley expresses his mature view of evil as he distinguishes between two kinds of evil: evil that has an objective basis and cannot be eradicated, and evil that is subjective but deeply based. After that grand metamorphosis the human race is still confronted by 'chance, death and mutability' (III, iv, 2D1) and like a matured man the poet remains silent regarding the origin of this kind of evil from which there is no escape. Misunderstanding about Shelley's idea of evil will be removed to a great extent if we attentively listen to what Shelley wants to communicate when he says in his Preface to \textit{Hellas}, "Let it not be supposed that I think the Gordian Knot of the origin of evil can be disentangled or that there is a true solution of the riddle." Jove is evil incarnate. But who gave him power? It was Prometheus, the champion of mankind. Evil can never be conquered by evil, it is to be conquered by good. The moment Prometheus replaced his hatred for Jove with love, the hour of his emancipation came spontaneously without much fuss.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., pp. 156-57.
Shelley is of the opinion that moral evil exerts a morbid and fascinating influence over man. Count Canci's plan was to force Beatrice to cause her own complete degradation by reducing her to his own malevolent design when he says:

What I most seek! No, 'tis her stubborn will Which, by its own consent, shall stoop as low As that which drags it down.

(The Cenci, IV, I, 10-12)

Often men's infected will permits evil to exist, his desire to the contrary notwithstanding. That is why even Napoleon, 'child of a fierce hour, wreaked so much of destruction of the world's hopes to satisfy his quest for blind power. But even then man is not crooked by nature and he is degenerate simply because the degenerate institutions made him so. "The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms before we shall find anything but disappointment in our intercourse with any but a few select spirits."16 Though ultimately he discarded Godwin's stand to a great extent, at the outset he fully agreed with him and traced the major moral evils and calamities to social, economic and political institutions. "The system must be changed. Individual moral reform cannot advance very rapidly or extensively while political institutions mold men according to the dead images of the past. Shelley

fundamentally wavered between two approaches, stressing individual reform as a poet, institutional reform as a practical thinker."\(^{17}\)

The failure of the French Revolution shocked many and caused still many to turn renegade but Shelley's approach to the Revolution and his analysis of its failure seemed to be based on sound principles. He agreed with Tom Paine in believing that the orgy of violence let loose by the people during the Revolution was due to the evil influence of the past despotism.

Shelley's creative period synchronised with the later phase of the Revolution; therefore, his understanding and analysis about the various aspects of the Revolution as well as the cause of its failure were a great deal different from that of the Romantic poets of the first generation. His heroes such as Prometheus, Leon, Cythna, etc. are typical heroes of the current revolutionary movement.

But in spite of the French Revolution, the texture of the eighteenth century conservative society did not undergo radical change. All the shades of evil continued unabated: Radicals were being persecuted; Roman Catholics were being tortured; wealth went on accumulating in the hands of the few and the conflict between Conservatism and Liberalism sharpened.

Almost the whole of Europe was suffering from the same type of oppression as the Frenchmen did and naturally they should have also revolted

\(^{17}\) Gerald McNiece, *op.cit.*, p. 159.
as they greeted the French Revolution. But the type of the French Revolution could not be repeated in other countries because the respective Governments encouraged a spirit of jealousy and ferocity being afraid of losing their sway. And Shelley opines that the superstructure of political institutions should be changed lock, stock and barrel. In order to believe in the efficacy of revolution the starting point should be the thesis that institutions would men. Shelley believed both the value and the need of revolution.

Shelley accused religion in general and Christianity in particular of perpetuating human misery by making them live under despicable ignorance. In a letter to Elizabeth Hitchener on July 25, 1811 Shelley wrote that religious establishments "augment in so vivid a degree the evils resulting from the system before us." Man has a fatal propensity for creating Jupiters for tormenting his own soul and for subduing his own imagination. Such deities are the products of man's imagination but once they take shape they become oppressors and impose limits on that imagination to which they owe their existence. The role of established religion is no better. "An established religion turns to deathlike apathy the sublimest ebullitions of most exalted genius and the spirit-stirring truths of a mind inflamed with the desire to benefitting mankind." 18

But religious institutions have deceptive appearances and they always put on a mask of benevolence while trying to corrupt and debase human race. Similarly in societies the despotic institutions assume

18 Essay on Christianity, Clark ed., p.213.
attractive masks while unleashing a reign of terror to perpetuate human misery. In Mask of Anarchy Fraud, Anarchy, Hypocrisy, and Murder assume respectable disguises to befoul the people. Love and Hope are the hopes for the regeneration of the degenerated human race. The cardinal virtues of freemen are Love, Hope and Self-esteem. Self-esteem is very important because one who has no respect for his own self cannot have any respect for others. In a mind devoid of self-respect and blunted by the prolonged effect of tyranny, the search of self-knowledge may reveal deep-rooted evils within one’s heart. “Shelley probed the workings of self-contempt both in the more pessimistic vein of Alastor and The Cenci and the hopeful one of Prometheus Unbound. Beatrice Cenci became, for him, a tragic character by her partial capitulation to the spirit of revenge, retaliation and atonement. By murdering her father, she illustrated microcosmically the power of evil over good. It was the French Revolution in miniature.”

Shelley considered ‘Slavery’ as a positive evil as it humiliates the slave as well as dehumanizes the slave-owner. His contempt for all form of slavery prompted him to raise his voice against the despotic rule of foreign rulers in countries like Italy, Greece and Spain and colonies like Ireland and India. His passion for freedom of Italy was aroused when he realized that slavery was the main cause of the miserable plight of the Neapolitans. He dedicated his Ode to Naples to the freedom

19 Gerald Nickele, op.cit., p.162.
struggle of Italy. The Greek war of independence stirred him to write Hellen in which he prophesied the victory of the Greeks over the Turks. His visit to Ireland made him aware of the evils of colonization and as such he worked for their liberation. He also favoured granting of independence to India.

Despite Shelley's balanced and penetrating probe into the problem of evil, his extra zeal for a millennium led many to wonder as to how much real evil was to him. His own utterance in Julian and Maddalo to the effect that evil exists because mankind so will and last but not least, Mrs. Shelley's comment in her note to Prometheus Unbound that Shelley believed that mankind had only to will in order to get rid of evil made Shelley's position still more vulnerable. But such attitude does not do justice to the poet's unique ability of measuring the gap between what man is and what he should have been. "He may lack the tragic vision of the power of evil, evil overcome only with difficulty through the cooperation of heroic energy and intelligence with some poised and mysterious grace. His position is neither superficial nor static, however."

In his later years when Shelley turned a reformer from a rebel, there was a shift in his attitude. Prof. Barnard is of the opinion that with Shelley's changed outlook, the problem of human happiness vis-a-vis political justice is "not primarily to give men knowledge of what is right and good, but to arouse in them the will to do that right and
act that good which they already know."21 At this stage Shelley differed from Godwin and put forward the theory of a separate will which may be corrupted and which needs constant stimulation by imagination.

21 Ellsworth Barnard, *Shelley's Religion* : Minneapolis; 1937, p.249