

This essay examines the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft, exploring how Romantic ideals of freedom and empathy challenge social and intellectual oppression

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Romanticism's Fight Against Oppression

The Romantic Era was not characterized by a single, consolidated way of thought. Instead, Romanticism is defined by diverse ideals, such as freedom, equality, and empathy, as expressed in the era's literature, which were instrumental in reshaping the world. During the social unrest from the French Revolution, writers sought moral renewal through human emotion and imagination. Many authors of the time, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Percy Bysshe Shelly, helped to push the boundaries of their society and encourage people to think outside of the rigid structure that promoted inequality and injustice. Much of this was in response to the aftermath of the French Revolution and a pushback against the rigid rational thinking of Enlightenment. In Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* and Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Romantic ideals of freedom and empathy are used to challenge social and intellectual oppression, revealing how the literature of the era sought to transform society through reason and the expansion of human potential.

Both Shelley and Wollstonecraft connect the Romantic ideals of freedom to liberation from social and intellectual oppression. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley argues that imagination is a force of moral and spiritual freedom, claiming that "poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life" (Shelley 1018). Through

this statement, he elevates artistic creation to an act of defiance against rigid social systems, suggesting that poetry can expand the boundaries of thought and inspire progress.

Similarly, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft demands intellectual and educational freedom for women, insisting that we must “Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it and there will be an end to blind obedience” (Wollstonecraft 146). As Graham Allen notes, her argument transforms the Romantic concept of freedom from an abstract ideal into a call for concrete social reform and “is partly responsible for the rise of these modern movements” of feminism (Allen). Both writers treat the human mind as the true site of revolution. Shelley through the liberation of imagination, and Wollstonecraft through the liberation of reason. In doing so, they reveal how Romantic freedom was not only emotional and artistic but also deeply political. Directly challenging the institutions that tried to control human potential and cause oppression.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft calls for social and intellectual freedom, arguing that only by encouraging rational thought can society achieve true equality. The education system of the time was designed to keep women in a state of ignorance and dependence, and society taught women to please men rather than develop their own minds, “a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers” (Wollstonecraft 139). Wollstonecraft exposes the narrow roles society has assigned to women. Through women’s lack of access to true education, it calls out the patriarchy for not acknowledging the true potential women have in favor of treating them as playthings and blindly obedient caretakers. She stresses this further, noting that even within the highest reaches of society lies the misbelief that women

are inferior to men, noting that “Many are the causes that, in the present corrupt state of society, contribute to enslave women by cramping their understandings.” (Wollstonecraft 145).

Through her work, she pushed for education for women at a time when women had nearly no independence and no say, making her an incredibly important feminist icon of her time (Joseph 137). She called for societal change through intellectual freedom for women, noting that if we choose to “Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing.” (Wollstonecraft 146). Wollstonecraft references a new world, one she cannot promise to her audience, yet her words call for an existence beyond the intellectual inequality of society, where women are encouraged to expand their minds (Allen). She draws awareness to the problem created in society, asking those in power to change their perspectives, freeing women from intellectual oppression, and bringing more equality to society.

Shelley, in contrast, stresses imagination and empathy as the moral drive towards freedom. He was a poet born into wealth and privilege who used his art to challenge the political oppression in society and the moral indifference of his peers (Joseph 919). In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley holds poets in high esteem, arguing that poets are not only essential to society as artists, but also as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” (Shelley 1023). With this statement, he frames poets as inciters of change who use their creative abilities for the betterment of society by fostering empathy and bringing awareness to the current limits and the possibilities for change within their existing societal structures.

Poetry is able to make the hidden beauties of the world visible, and as Shelley writes, “The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work

a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry,” (Shelley 1023). Here, Shelley describes poetry as crucial to the understanding of others’ perspectives and for improving the conditions of an oppressed society. Referencing poets as messengers who expand the potential of humanity with their words, he once again calls a challenge. This time to the people themselves, awakening them to the truth and bolstering their courage to fight the oppression they see. These claims came at a time when poetry was dismissed as superficial by many critics, making Shelley’s stance on imagination as the foundation for progress even more radical (Varal 278). Poetry does more than just make people feel while they read. Shelley believed that by awakening sympathy in his audience, poetry could bridge the gap between the privileged and the oppressed. His conception of empathy is transformative. It demands moral engagement from his audience, and by envisioning poets as legislators, Shelley implies that imagination itself can shape laws, institutions, and collective values. In this sense, empathy becomes a political act, allowing individuals to see beyond their own interests and to reform the social order through compassion and empathy. He shows us the way poetry has the power to inspire social reform within the people, which pushes them to create real change through moral improvement.

Reason functions as a crucial bridge between Romantic emotion and social reform in both Shelley’s and Wollstonecraft’s works. Though often defined by their intense emotion, Romanticism in these works depends equally on reason. Wollstonecraft argues that women have been denied their rational potential by being treated as “alluring objects” rather than thinking beings and that “men have increased that inferiority until women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures.” (Wollstonecraft 140,153). Her insistence that women should cultivate reason, not simply sentiment, transforms Enlightenment logic into what feels like a Romantic era act of rebellion. It’s a passionate demand for intellectual equality.

Shelley echoes this combination of thought and feeling in *A Defence of Poetry*, where he insists that “Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.” (Shelley 1015). For Shelley, reason gives structure to imagination’s transformative power; it is the tool through which moral and social progress takes shape. Shelley believed that it was “the necessity of reformation and revolution to abolish current inequality and injustice” that plagued society, in order to bring about freedom (Varal 280). Both authors ultimately challenge the false divide between reason and emotion, showing that a truly free and humane society depends on rational understanding, imagination, and empathy.

Both Shelley and Wollstonecraft ultimately argue that liberation begins within the individual mind but spreads itself outward into society. Their shared Romantic faith in human potential makes empathy a revolutionary force they bring to their audience. Wollstonecraft’s appeal to reason comes from compassion for women who have been denied the opportunity to think for themselves, while Shelley’s vision of imagination depends on the reader’s capacity to feel deeply for others. Both transform internal emotions into a tool for justice. By redefining imagination and reason as intertwined forces, they challenge the political hierarchies and the intellectual hierarchies that separate logic from feeling. In this way, both writers position empathy as the moral center of Romantic freedom and a means of healing the divide between thought and emotion.

Shelley and Wollstonecraft are incredible examples of Romantic Era authors. Both sought liberation for the oppressed through a mental and spiritual awakening. They rejected the rigid thinking of the Enlightenment and emphasized emotion, empathy, and individuality, arguing that freedom and change begin with the human mind. Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* advocates for the liberation of women through education and reason, whereas Shelley’s *A*

Defence of Poetry envisions liberation through imagination and art. Although they challenge the oppression they see from different angles, both writers view freedom not as rebellion for its own sake, but as the key to unlocking human potential. They reflect the Romantic belief that literature can transform the moral and social fabric of the world, proving that the power to change society begins in the mind and spirit of the individual. In uniting empathy with intellect, Shelley and Wollstonecraft reveal the Romantic conviction that true progress arises from within the human spirit. Their works invite us not only to imagine freedom but to act it out, through art, education, and their found moral courage. These ideas from them continue to be relevant today, which shows that the Romantic belief in the transformative power of imagination and reason still challenges us to rethink the limits of human potential.

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