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Topic for B.A. English Part-1 Hons. and Alternative English (50 mks)

Love (One Word is too often Profaned)- Shelley

Text

One word is too often profaned

For me to profane it,

One feeling too falsely disdained

For thee to disdain it;

One hope is too like despair

For prudence to smother,

And pity from thee more dear

Than that from another.

I can give not what men call love,
But wilt thou accept not
The worship the heart lifts above
And the Heavens reject not,—
The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow?

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 – 1822) was one of the major English Romantic poets, widely regarded as one of the finest lyric and philosophical poets in the English language. Shelley is best known for classic poems such as "Ozymandias", "Ode to the West Wind", "To a Skylark", "Music, When Soft Voices Die", "The Cloud" and *The Masque of Anarchy*. His other major works include a groundbreaking verse drama, *The Cenci* (1819), and long, visionary, philosophical poems such as *Queen Mab* (later reworked as *The Daemon of the World*), *Alastor*, *The Revolt of Islam*, *Adonais*, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820)—widely considered his masterpiece, *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama* (1821) and his final, unfinished work, *The Triumph of Life* (1822).

Shelley developed a very strong affection towards Jane Williams and addressed a number of poems to her. In most of these poems, Shelley projects his love for Jane in a spiritual and devotional manner. This poem is an example of that. Shelley's affection towards Jane was known to Edward Williams and also to Mary Shelley. Shelley wrote a number of poems devoted to Jane including *With a Guitar*, *To Jane*, *One Word is Too Often Profaned*, *To Jane: The Invitation*, *To Jane: The Recollection* and *To Jane: The Keen Stars Were Twinkling*.

The poem was published in London in 1824 in the collection *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* by John and Henry L. Hunt. Like the poem called “*To A Lady, With A Guitar*”, The poem, *One Word Is Too Often Profaned*, is short one, and was addressed to Jane Williams. It expresses Shelley’s genuine and deep devotion to Jane Williams with whom he had a special kind of relationship. Jane Williams exercised a considerable influence on Shelley, and the story of their relationship makes interesting reading. In the poem, he elevates her to a high position and offers her his worship.

In *One Word is Too Often Profaned*, Shelley rejects the use of the word *Love* to describe his relationship with Jane. He says that this word has been so often profaned or misused that he will not use it to describe this relationship. He then goes on to say that the usage of this word may be rejected by Jane herself and that his feelings for her are too pure to be falsely disdained.

He uses the word *pity* and states that the feeling of *pity* from Jane is more dear than *love* from any other woman. At this point he starts elevating Jane's stature to something larger than other women of the world. Shelley chooses to employ the word *worship* to describe his devotion towards Jane. He states that the

feeling of worship that he feels towards Jane is something that is uplifting and is also moral (and the heavens reject not).

He describes the nature of his devotion: it is the devotion of a moth for a star or what the night feels towards the next morning. He describes his devotion as something that lies beyond worldly existence and strife (the sphere of our sorrow).

Shelley says that he cannot offer to her what is generally known as love, because the word “love” has been cheapened and vulgarized. But he can offer to her the feeling of worship which has an uplifting effect upon him and which even God does not reject. His reverence for her may be compared to the impossible desire of the moth for the star. He impatiently longs for her just as the night is impatient to be followed by the day. Living as he does in a world of sorrow, he offers to her his heartfelt devotion, and he asks her whether she will accept it.

The metrical feet used in the poem are a mixture of anapests and iambs. The first line of each couplet contains three accents and the second line contains two.

The poem is a conceit, like most seventeenth century love-poems, and may provoke the ‘tetchy’ rebuke, “More matter with less art”. What this critic means to say is that, though on the surface the poem appears to be shining and attractive, there is very little matter or meaning in it. One is inclined to agree with this judgement, because the poem is really a trifle except for the line “The desire of the moth for the star” which is often applied to Shelley’s unattainable and impossible ideals.

Desmond King-Hele has the following comment to offer on this poem: “This poem is one of those anthologists’ darlings so damaging to Shelley’s reputation. Continual reprinting in anthologies has quite mummified it” – deadened

it; taken away its life and soul – boredom is the stock response on meeting it again. The poem has a glossy finish to deter scratches, but the ill-mannered cur who does scratch finds little beneath the surface gloss.

THANK YOU