

INDIVIDUALITY THROUGH TRANSGRESSIONS IN SHELLEY'S *ZASTROZZI*

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Abstract

As a gothic fiction by P.B. Shelley, *Zastrozzi* celebrates individuality. Individualism being a trait of the Romantic Revival, the characters in the novella are illustrated with their self assertions of liberty and freedom. Although the age demanded allegiance to the principles of the Evangelicals, it is seen that Shelley's characters exhibit a transgression from the religious norms. The decadence of virtues and a consequent rise of vices in *Zastrozzi* and *Matilda* also show the moral transgressions they undergo to assert their individuality. From a close analysis of the elements of individuality in the fiction, it is noticeable that the characters exhibit this trait only through diverse transgressions.

Fundamentally different from the average Gothic fiction, *Zastrozzi* is a 'daydream in which unconscious conflicts are worked out in disguise'. As a Gothic novelette written by P.B. Shelley at the age of seventeen, it embodies the contradictory forces at work within the author's psyche during his adolescence. Published in the year 1810, the fiction outlines the atheistic worldview through the villain *Zastrozzi* and touches upon his earliest thoughts on irresponsible self-indulgence and violent revenge. The Gothic mode in radiant opposition to the Enlightenment ideals of order, decorum and rational control had opened to literary exploration the realm of nightmarish terror, violence and aberrant psychological states. Women in distress, threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male, a metonymy of gloom and horror, etc characterise the romantic Gothic fiction.

An emphasis on personal freedom and liberty is a distinction of Romanticism. Heroes and heroines of Romantic novels often questioned their roles in society and purposes in life. The idea of the individual's imagination as a way of exploring psychology and philosophy also gained popularity during the Romantic period. As opposed to the nobles, peasants or merchants in the early eighteenth century, the new industrialists of the Romantic age asserted their social, political and economic individuality. Characters like *Zastrozzi*, *Matilda* and *Verezzi* pursue their individual tastes in a way not possible even in the Renaissance. Individual striving for revenge and later freedom is a consequent result. Evoking terror through the depiction of physical and

psychological violence in a medieval or medieval type of setting, the Gothic characters explore the desire for individuality.

In *Zastrozzi*, the characters achieve their individuality through transgressions; religious, social and moral. Utilizing intimidation, deception and even flattery the characters attain their objective. At the beginning of the novella, Pietro Zastrozzi, an outlaw and his two servants Benardo and Ugo, disguised in masks abduct Verezzi and leave him in a cavern hideout. Locked in a room with an iron door, Verezzi is attached to the wall with his waist and limbs chained. Based on the principle of the Evangelical party of the Church of England which flourished from 1789 to 1850, that the human beings are corrupt and need Christ to save them, it is visible that there exists a religious transgression in the novella. As opposed to the Evangelical zeal in demonstrating spirituality and affection for God, the characters in this Gothic fiction question the omnipotence of the Creator. “Where, then, is the boasted mercy of God”, exclaimed the frantic Matilda, “if he suffer his creatures to endure agony such as this? Or where his wisdom, if he implant in the heart passions furious-uncontrollable as mine, doomed to destroy their happiness?” Verezzi’s love for Julia infuriates Matilda and she reaches the “highest pitch of desperation”. In indescribable agony of mind, she dashes her head against the floor and swears eternal revenge on Julia. The age had demanded an essentially Romantic conception of religion that stressed imagination, intensity and emotion and also upon the teachings of the Bible. “One of the most savage and improbable demons”, Zastrozzi concocts a plan to torture and to torment Verezzi the murderer of his mother. He accomplishes this revenge as a self-proclaimed atheist and says, “I am alive to nothing but revenge.” Contradictory to the Puritan postulates of demonstrating spirituality by working for others, Zastrozzi extinguishes the faint spark of religion which gleamed in Matilda’s bosom.

“But religion! Oh!” -Matilda

“I thought thy soul was daring.” replied Zastrozzi, “ I thought thy mind was towering: and did I then err, in the different estimate I had formed of thy character?- O yield not yourselves, Matilda thus to false, foolish and vulgar prejudices”-

As claimed in his “The Necessity of Atheism”, Shelley himself refutes all the possible types of arguments for God’s existence. Like Zastrozzi, he argues that a supernatural creator is an unnecessary hypothesis. Shelley establishes his individuality and uses the word “God” in a metaphorical sense.

In style, the Romantics preferred boldness over the preceding age’s desire for restraint and they promoted the conception of an artist as the “inspired” creator. They favoured the idea that each person must create the system by which to live. Rebellious religious norms, Zastrozzi establishes his self-righteousness and does not offer to repent for his sins of taking revenge on his enemy, Verezzi. Retribution did not instil fear in him. Instead, he remarks,

“Am I not convinced of the non-existence of a Deity?

Why need I then to shudder at death?”

He, then, meets his death “with a wild convulsive laugh of exulting revenge”. Even while writhing under the agony of almost insupportable torture, his nerves were stretched and his firmness did not fail him. As a Romantic villain, there is a self-assertion of Zastrozzi’s unique and eccentric existence through certain religious transgressions.

Romanticism also marked a departure from virtues backed by organized religion to nature as a form of divine inspiration. Material and traditional aspects of society were treated as artificial and appreciation of nature was viewed as a return to the basic elements of human

existence. The existence of women in the century was very much depended on the position of men. Most women of the age lived in a state little better than slavery, where they had to obey men. Men held all the resources and women had no independent means of subsistence. The female protagonist in the novel, Matilda transgresses these social restrictions. A woman who remained single in the Romantic age attracted social disapproval and pity. She could not have children or cohabit with a man; whereas Matilda driven by her passion lives with Verezzi. She asserts her immense affection for Verezzi and plans horrid schemes of destruction against Julia. Realizing that her tireless efforts to seduce him have become unsuccessful, Matilda is destined to take revenge on Julia, Verezzi's lady love. She tells Zastrozzi,

“You shall to Italy- to Naples-watch Julia's every movement, attend her every step, and in the guise of a friend destroy her: but beware, whilst you assume the softness of the dove, to forget not the cunning of the serpent. On you I depend for destroying her, my own exertion shall find Verezzi; I myself will gain his love- Julia must die, and expiate the crime of daring to rival me, with her hated blood.”

Nature also serves in declaring Matilda's obstinate decision. Romantic “nature” is a vehicle for self-consciousness. The Romantics' preoccupation with natural phenomenon amounts to a search for the true self, for one's real identity.

“The moon-beam darting her oblique rays under volumes of louring vapour, threatened an approaching storm. The lurid sky was tinged with a yellowish lustre-the forest-tops rustled in the rising tempest-big drops fell-a fall of lightning, and, instantly after, a peal of bursting thunder, struck with sudden terror the bosom of Matilda.”

Unlike the then existing relation between man and woman, Matilda stood out in her vigorous candour to win Verezzi as her partner. She outlives her barriers and even Zastrozzi alleges his support. “Matilda, we will not forsake each other; your cause is mine; distrust between us is foolish.” Julia on the other hand is a woman threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male, a true characteristic of the Gothic fiction. The individuality of both these women are determined by high, overwrought emotion; a result of sorrow, anger and terror.

Apart from this, the Romantic Revival that began in the late eighteenth century had witnessed an almost unparalleled triumph of the sense of individual over the general sense of mankind. Thus, Romantic morality is more stoic than epicurean; virtue, purpose and courage have the highest value, not pleasure or happiness as we usually conceive of them. A passionate morality requires freedom, which is considered the greatest happiness. The stoics taught that destructive emotions resulted from errors in judgement, and that a sage, or person of “moral and intellectual perfection” would not suffer such emotions. Zastrozzi's revenge against his father, whom he murdered and against “his progeny” exhibits his robust defiance of the Romantic morality. He confesses that his objective was to achieve eternal damnation of Verezzi's soul based on the proscription of the Christian religion against suicide. The villain goes to his death on the rack rejecting and renouncing religion and morality. Although Zastrozzi stands firm in his decisions, he transgresses his “stoic” morality and asserts his agonies. His sense of pity for his mother Olivia's plight is seen in his words:

"My mother soon brought me into the world--the seducer married another; and when the destitute Olivia begged a pittance to keep her from starving, her proud betrayer spurned her from his door, and tauntingly bade her exercise her profession.--The crime I committed with thee, perjured one! exclaimed my mother as she left his door, shall be my last!--and, by

heavens! she acted nobly. A victim to falsehood, she sank early to the tomb, and, ere her thirtieth year, she died--her spotless soul fled to eternal happiness.--Never shall I forget, though but fourteen when she died--never shall I forget her last commands.--My son, said she, my Pietrino, revenge my wrongs--revenge them on the perjured Verezzi--revenge them on his progeny forever.”

Zastrozzi did not repress his feelings and endure it patiently. Instead, accepting his doom, he receives death: “Since all I have to do on earth is completed.”

Taking their mantra from the French Revolution, Romantics strongly believed in personal freedom, democratic ideals, and the importance of the rights of each individual. It can be fairly argued that Romanticism represents the first convergence of individualistic attitudes into a social and religious movement that places an emphasis on the solitary individual. Romanticism represents a unique attitude of the mind rather than a set of particular stylistic traits and it celebrates the individual. It encompasses intuition, individual experience, individual thoughts, words, and deeds. As demonstrated, this aspect is vividly visible in Shelley’s *Zastrozzi* wherein each individual asserts his or her self individuality. Although Romantics demonstrated a strong faith in the fundamental goodness and eventual perfectibility of humankind, the individuality in this Gothic fiction is inlaid with certain religious, social and moral transgressions as men of all ages are prone to.

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