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Two Sides of Egalitarianism: William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley

Egalitarianizmin İki Yüzü:
William Wordsworth ve Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Abstract

Egalitarianism is a social and political philosophy propounding that all mankind should have equal rights and treatment on the premise that everyone is born equal. Although the philosophy dates back to Stoicism in Ancient Greece, it reached its apogee with the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789). Impelled by the egalitarian concepts of equality, fraternity, and liberty as well as the revolutionary ideas of English intellectuals such as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, English romantic poets expressed a deep concern for injustice and inequality in English society. Although their starting point is the same, the romantic poets' notion of egalitarianism diverges from each other due to socio-political conditions of their era. This paper outlines two sides of egalitarianism in specific works from two different generations romantic poets,

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Wordsworth and Shelley, to show that Wordsworth's egalitarian concern is based on luck egalitarianism that attributes inequality to an individual's either natural endowments or responsibility; whereas, Shelley adopts political egalitarianism regarding "equality of rights" as a prerequisite to building an egalitarian system. Thus, the paper aims to reveal that Wordsworth primarily detects the problem of inequality by attributing it to 'luck', whereas, Shelley due to the heat of current politics offers political solutions to this problem twenty years later.

Keywords: *luck egalitarianism, William Wordsworth, political egalitarianism, Percy Bysshe Shelley*

Öz

Egalitaryanizm, herkesin eşit doğduğu varsayımından yola çıkarak tüm insanlığın eşit haklara ve muameleye sahip olması gerektiğini öne süren sosyal ve politik bir felsefedir. Felsefenin geçmişi Antik Yunan'da stoacılığa dayanmakla birlikte, eşitlikçi felsefe 1776 Amerikan Bağımsızlık Bildirgesi ve 1789-1815 Fransız Devrimi ile doruk noktasına ulaşmıştır. Eşitlik, kardeşlik ve özgürlük gibi eşitlikçi kavramların yanı sıra İngiltere'deki sanayi devrimi ve siyasi değişimlerin de etkisiyle İngiliz siyasi düşünürler, aydınlar ve edebiyatçılar bu kavramlar üzerine kafa yormaya başlamışlardır. Özellikle romantik şairler sadece devrimlerden değil, aynı zamanda William Godwin, Thomas Paine ve Mary Wollstonecraft gibi diğer İngiliz aydınlarının devrimci fikirlerinden de etkilenerek, çağdaş İngiliz toplumunun maruz kaldığı adaletsizlik ve eşitsizlik konusunda derin endişelerini dile getirmişlerdir. Ancak, "kimin eşitliği?" ve "neyin eşitliği?" gibi soruları merkeze alan egalitaryanizm teorisi dönemin sosyo-politik gelişmelerinin şekillendirdiği çeşitli tartışmaları da beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu bakımdan, ç ikiş noktaları eşitlikçi bir dünya ve daha adil bir sistem hayali olsa da romantik şairlerin eşitlikçilik anlayışları, yaşadıkları dönemin sosyo-politik koşulları nedeniyle birbirinden ayrılmaktadır. İki farklı kuşak romantik şairleri olan Wordsworth ve Shelley'nin eşitlik kavramına yaklaşımlarındaki farklılıktan yola çıkan bu çalışma, Wordsworth'ün eşitlikçi kaygılarının eşitsizliği bireyin doğal yeteneklerine veya sorumluluğuna bağlayan "şans egalitaryanizmine" dayandığını Shelley'nin ise politik egalitaryanizm üzerinde durarak "hakların eşitliği"ni eşitlikçi bir sistem inşa etmenin ön koşulu olarak gördüğünü ileri sürmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma, Wordsworth'ün *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*, Percy Bysshe Shelley'nin ise *A Song: Men of England*, eserlerindeki eşitlik kavramının izini sürerek, iki romantik yazarın eşitlikçi bakış açısındaki farklılıkları açığa çıkarmaktadır. Böylelikle, çalışma "eşitlikçi" idealleri paylaşılar da Wordsworth'ün öncelikle 'şans'a dayandırdığı eşitsizlik sorununu ortaya çıkarmakla yetindiğini, Shelley'nin ise yirmi yıl içerisinde yaşanan siyasi olayların etkisi ile bu sorunun üstesinden gelmek için siyasi çözümler sunduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *şans egalitaryanizm, William Wordsworth, politik egalitaryanizm, Percy Bysshe Shelley*

Introduction

The late 18th and early 19th centuries witnessed a series of Revolutions which paved the way for radical changes across the world. On the socio-economic level, the British Industrial Revolution (1760¹-1830) sowed the seeds of a capitalist society which widened the gap between the rich and the poor. During this painful transition, the development of societal polarization, where the rich and the poor reached its peak, also mirrored itself in injustice and inequality². As rich investors got richer the poor suffered due to a chain of catastrophes led by industrialization and urbanization such as the rise in unemployment, a decrease in production, and periodical economic crises. Furthermore, the prevalence of ‘laissez-faire’³ as a public and political policy prevented any governmental regulation for both the corrupted socio-economic system and its brutal consequences. On the political level, however, people from different parts of the world tried to solve these injustices through revolutions. The American Revolution of 1775-81, the French Revolution of 1789-1815, the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804, and the Spanish Revolution of 1820 etc. brought concepts of equality, fraternity and liberty into prominence.⁴

Within such social and political turmoil, building an egalitarian world to wipe out all kinds of inequality, injustice, and tyranny became the ultimate desire of people because they believed that everyone was created equal. In the “Declaration of Independence” in 1776, thirteen united colonies of America clearly evinced these egalitarianist notions:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.-That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it [...] (Declaration of Independence, 2022)

As observed, ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ were given priority as the two absolute rights bestowed by God. According to the Declaration, the British government posed a threat to these fundamental rights of the people of the thirteen colonies, and this gave the American people the right to defend themselves and eliminate the threat. With this regard, the driving force behind these revolutionist minds of the time was the search for “equality” and “justice”, and this brought the concept of “egalitarianism” to the fore, which maintained its worldwide popularity even after the revolutions.

Among the revolutions, however, the French Revolution, stands out as the most influential movements that lays the groundwork for certain political ideologies based on ‘equality’, ‘fraternity’ and ‘liberty’ since other revolutions could not go beyond being colonial uprisings despite their contribution to these concepts (Hobsbawm, 1996: 54). In particular, the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” issued by the French National Constituent Assembly in 1789, on the eve of the French Revolution, fueled egalitarian tendencies in society. With seventeen articles on equality and democratic rights, the Declaration was “a

manifesto against hierarchical society of nobility privilege” (Hobsbawm, 1996: 59). Within this frame, it starts with an article underlining the crucial need for liberty and the equality of rights: “Man are born and remain free and equal in rights” (Declaration of the Rights of Man, 2022). Everyone is accepted equal in front of the law and every kind of social distinction is opposed except those for the “general good”. Moreover, equal treatment and equal opportunity are ensured with Article 6 that portrays all citizens as “equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents” (Declaration of the Rights of Man, 2022). This opened the way for pursuing careers according to talent and interest rather than social status. In this sense, by replacing the ‘privilege’ system with equality in democratic rights, the Declaration marks the beginning of a new era by raising hopes of building an egalitarian world order.

Seeking equality, fraternity and liberty in the political arena also had some impact on the social thinking and literature of these times. The publication of the epoch-making works such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790)⁵ and Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Men* (1791-2)⁶ contributed to the discussions revolving around the French Revolution and its ideologies. Written as a response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which explicitly advocates hereditary ‘monarchy’ and ‘property’ as opposed to the egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution, both works were attacks on the lasting injustice and despotism. They refuted Burke’s claims on the necessity of monarchy for the common good by revealing that the tyranny of the monarch posed a threat to such fundamental rights of men as liberty and equality. In *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) William Godwin, moved the debates a step further by discussing the abolishment of the government and other political institutions as the prerequisite of a just and egalitarian system.⁷ He, moreover, underlined the significance of equal opportunities and distribution of property stating that “We should endeavour to afford to all the same opportunities and the same encouragement, and to render justice the common interest and choice” (1793: 108). Impelled by these revolutionary ideas, the romantic poets, in particular William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, got involved in the literary and political debates by expressing their concern for every sort of injustice and inequality in society.

In the light of these, Wordsworth and Shelley appeared as advocates of ‘egalitarianism’ in the literary arena but developed different approaches to the term because of the time gap of almost twenty years between them. Within this scope, this paper scrutinizes the two sides of egalitarianism expressed by two prominent romantic figures William Wordsworth, the older generation, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, the younger generation. The paper, thus, aims to lay bare that the socio-political developments of their times laid the groundwork for differences not only in the two poets’ ideals of equality but also in the approaches they developed to the term. To this end, Wordsworth’s “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” (1798) will be analyzed in relation to ‘luck egalitarianism’ which might be read as a protest against the ‘inequalities of opportunity’ and “unequal distribution of resources” while Shelley’s “A Song: Men of England” (1819) will be examined as a part of his ‘political egalitarianism’ that manifest

itself as an outcry over the exploitation of the proletariat and a call for a revolt to gain equal democratic rights and property.

1. Egalitarianism: A general frame

Egalitarianism is a multidimensional term that can be discussed on different levels including physical, moral, ethical as well as socio-economical. The vague and ambiguous nature of the term renders it hard for theorists to clarify what egalitarianism is and create a certain framework of the term. However, in its basic terms, “egalitarianism”, a word derived from the French word *egal* meaning “equal”, “is the view that all humans are equal and should be treated as equals not only in terms of political rights but also in the allocation of resources” (Gibson et al., 2008: 661). To put it another way, regardless of one’s education, gender, occupation, age, race or social status, everyone is accepted equal in “political” rights and distribution of wealth and income, thus deserves equal treatment. In *Egalitarianism*, Iowa Hirose foregrounds ‘economical’ dimension by defining egalitarianism as “a class of distributive principles, which claim that individuals should have equal quantities of well-being or morally relevant factors that affect their life” (2015: 1). On the other hand, in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* the term is described just on the ‘moral’ basis, and the origin of the egalitarian doctrines is given as the idea that all human persons are equal in fundamental worth or moral status (Arneson, 2013). These ‘political’, ‘economical’ and ‘moral’ aspects pointed out by the definitions evince various controversies and debates on the term which has been cumulatively shaping egalitarianism since it first appeared.

Egalitarianism as a term has a long history starting with the Stoics⁸ who based the theory of egalitarianism on the principle of ‘the law of nature’. According to this principle, “all things behaved according to the law of their own being” which renders human beings equal and free since they are endowed with ‘reason’, whereas animals are not (Brown, 1991: 22). In medieval society, this view was replaced by the Christian Father’s acknowledgment of the existing social order and discrimination among ranks, even slavery. They regarded the authority of high social ranks necessary to tame the vicious nature of man which led to his fall. Reformation, however, brought egalitarian ideals on the surface by challenging the absolute authority of the Church. This gained momentum with Renaissance humanism which promoted the potential of individuals and demanded equality for everyone by resisting every kind of privilege.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, egalitarianism evolved into a principle of social philosophy with thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, who predicated their theory of egalitarianism on “social and environmental dynamics” (Afolyan, 2016: 1069). They furthered “individualism” by holding society and environmental differences responsible for the inequalities among equally born people and accused society of destroying the natural potential of human beings. With the rise of utilitarianism in the eighteenth century, the established order of society was endorsed with its current inequalities. On the other hand, the nineteenth century was marked by Marx’s ideas

which depict “property” as the main obstacle in the path to build an egalitarian society. For him, property, either private or common, creates a competition among people which leads to a disparity in society. In this respect, the nineteenth century egalitarianism emerged as a more ‘economical’ term centering the egalitarian theory primarily on an economical basis.

In the light of these developments, egalitarianism, in time, has turned out to be a very broad term which gave birth to different types originating from ideas and principles like “moral egalitarianism”, “luck egalitarianism”, “political egalitarianism”, “legal egalitarianism”, “gender egalitarianism” and many others. However, in this part the scope of the study will be limited to two prominent theories of egalitarianism; “luck egalitarianism” and “politicegalitarianism” as these theories not only brought comprehensive approaches to the inequalities and injustice in the post-Industrial Revolution England but also predominate over the literary works of William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley successively.

2. Luck egalitarianism and William Wordsworth

Luck egalitarianism is a doctrine of equality and justice primarily based on “distributive equality” or “equality of resources”. It was first introduced in 1981 by Ronald Dworkin who realized the current egalitarian theories’ indifference to the individual’s responsibility and natural endowments and aimed at creating “a responsibility-sensitive egalitarian theory” (Hirose, 2015: 41). Dworkin’s luck egalitarianism seeks for a distributive justice to eliminate inequalities that stem from the luck which he divides as “brute luck” and “option luck”. The “brute luck” stands for the luck that an individual plays no part such as natural endowments, talent, inheritance, etc., and “option luck” includes the outcome of a person’s deliberate choices or a risk that s/he has taken (Dworkin, 1981: 293). In this division, it is “brute luck” that creates inequality and injustice and requires the equal distribution of resources to clear this injustice off.

A few years later, another luck egalitarianist, Richard Arneson defends a different theory for distributive equality based on “equality of opportunity for welfare”. Anderson rejects using resource-based theory of Dworkin describing it as a “handy rough and ready approximation” (1989: 87). Instead, Anderson prefers using “equality of opportunity for welfare” which refers to “equivalent sets of life options” an individual acquires when s/he reaches the responsibility of adulthood (Arneson, 1999: 488). Similarly, G. A. Cohen contributed to luck egalitarianism by refuting both equality of ‘resources’ and ‘welfare’, and brings forth the idea of “equal access to advantage”. He asserts that Dworkin’s distinction between “preferences and resources” is not appropriate for his motivation while the “concept of welfare”, preferred also by Arneson is too narrow. He suggests that “the fundamental distinction for an egalitarian is between choice and luck in the shaping of people’s fates” (1989: 907). Despite these differences of opinion on distributive equality among Dworkin, Anderson and Cohen, they all agree upon the core luck egalitarian view that is “egalitarianism need not compensate for all disadvantages, but rather for “involuntary” disadvantage which is the sort that does not reflect the subject’s choice” (Knight 2013: 928). As a responsibility based egalitarian theory, luck egalitarianism, in this regard, is quite compatible with William

Wordsworth's egalitarianist ideas that usually appear with his unfortunate characters who are responsible for neither their poverty nor their misery.

William Wordsworth, as one of the first-generation romantic poets, stands out with his deep concern for the current social problems and discriminations at the time social inequality and injustice were climbing. Basically, in his literary works his egalitarian attitude appears in two ways as 'a revolt against neoclassical elitism' and as 'a resistance against socio-economic inequalities'. Within this framework, Wordsworth's luck egalitarianism is firstly observed in his poems centering on common people and everyday events. Needless to say, this is a reaction to neoclassical elitism which attributed poetry only to aristocracy and high culture. Wordsworth, furthermore, refutes every kind of elitism and privileged position, including the 'poet'. In the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* he states that "a poet is not superior to other people or separate and different from other human beings since he is a "man speaking to man"⁹ ("Preface", 2012: 299) because "the poet thinks and feels in the spirit of the passions of men" and does not write "for poets alone but for men"¹⁰ (2012: 303). For Wordsworth, elaborating on the common subject matter through a common language is a sufficient way to convey individual feelings as well as to reduce the exalted nature of poetic diction to everyday mediocrity. Predicating his characterization on the idea that each individual thoughts, feelings, and experiences are worth expressing, he depicts characters from lower ranks of society in his "social poems". According to Mark Storey, this extends not only the subject matter of poetry, but also the audience and is a way of saying to "the Cumberland Beggar, the Female Vagrant, the Mad Mother, the Forsaken Indian Woman – these poems are about you; but they are also for you" (2000: 9). As a result, by composing his poems from the viewpoint of rustic people and displaying this simple setting with a common language, Wordsworth manages to appeal to everyone, not just the educated, intellectual, and elite.

On the other hand, Wordsworth's resistance to socio-economic inequalities in the society -the second way mentioned above- can be traced in his works as his search for compensation of the luck element through the equal distribution of the resources. He not only puts emphasis on the equal rights of all people and the worth of each individual thoughts, feelings, and experiences but also challenges the traditional, hierarchical social system, which assumes that some people (upper classes, men) are 'inherently' superior to others (lower classes, women). This view is closely associated with the core idea of luck egalitarianism which desires to build an egalitarian society irrespective of natural endowments. Indeed, one of the underlying reasons¹¹ of Wordsworth's contentment with the common and ordinary people was presumably this luck egalitarianism with its emphasis on the inequalities they were exposed to because of some endowments beyond their control. Within this framework, his luck egalitarianist viewpoint mainly manifests itself in his social protest poems among which "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" stands out.

"Goody Blake and Harry Gill", published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) with a subtitle of "A True Story", is the very embodiment of Wordsworth's luck egalitarianist standpoint with its story juxtaposing the rich and poor. Goody¹² Blake, an old woman, is caught while stealing a few sticks to get warm in the cold winter from the hedge of a farmer, Harry Gill, who treats

Blake harshly and Blake curses him because of his unjust treatment towards her. From the luck egalitarianist point of view, there are two circumstances that led to this unjust treatment and inequality: her social status and gender. In other words, being in a superior position as a rich farmer Harry Gill treated her this way because as a worker, she is lower than him, and as an old 'woman' she is too weak and feeble to ward him off. In this sense, neither her position as a worker nor her femininity is her choice nor it is under her control, which deems the inequality and unjust treatment here as 'unfair' according to the luck egalitarianists. As being a woman is not her decision and nor is her poverty, Wordsworth, signals that Goody Blake morally cannot be held responsible for the consequences of the act of stealing. The poem, in this respect, not only points out to the part that "luck" plays in this inequality but also raises some questions about the moral aspect of stealing to survive.

In the poem, the vivid portrayal of the rich and poor dichotomy sheds light on the unequal distribution of wealth and the unequal treatment in post-industrial England. To protest the poor living conditions of the lower class against the luxurious life of the higher class, the poem arouses pity for Goody Blake regarding her poverty and helplessness frequently repeating the word "poor" and describes her as an old, poor spinner who is "thinly clad" (2012: 273). On the other hand, the affection, sympathy and pity aroused for Goody are intensified with a contrary portrait of Harry Gill as a young, rich sheep dealer who "has no lack" of waistcoats and "has a blanket on his back /And coats to smother nine" (2012: 273). The disparity between Harry Gill's property, which he keeps more than sufficient to get warm, and Goody Blake's poverty, which is the reason of all her misery, is underlined further with a detailed description of how she suffers from cold in winter to increase the sense of inequality and injustice:

But when the ice our streams did fetter,
Oh then how her old bones would shake!
You would have said, if you had met her,
'Twas a hard time for Good Blake.
Her evenings then were dull and dead:
Sad case it was, as you may think,
For very cold to go to bed;
And then for cold not sleep a wink. (Wordsworth, 2012: 273)

The desperate situation Goody Blake is in, in a way, mitigates her crime since she must keep herself warm in order to survive. Moreover, to justify this unlawful act, Wordsworth takes attention to the harsh working conditions of the lower class. After the Industrial Revolution, especially in textile, the use of machines in factories instead of human labor resulted in the dismissal of many people and increased working hours with inadequate wages. As a woman living apparently in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, she gets lower wages than men, which is indirectly indicated with her miserable living conditions in spite of her hard work. Thus, Wordsworth reveals that although Goody Blake works hard despite her old age, this is not enough to make her living:

All day she spun in her poor dwelling,
And then her three hour's work at night!
Alas! 'twas hardly worth the telling,
It would not pay candle-light. (Wordsworth, 2012: 273)

Wordsworth criticizes social injustice revealing that in spite of her hard work Goody Blake could not get a sufficient wage to fulfil her basic needs such as keeping warm in winter. From a luck egalitarianist perspective, the necessity of stealing for survival stems from Goody Blake's natural endowment rather than her responsibility, which renders her immoral and unlawful act as moral and just. Goody Blake, thus, cannot be held responsible for the act of stealing morally as her inequality is unjust. When Harry catches her out and fiercely seizes her by her arm, she puts a curse on him, which comes true in the end although she has just committed a crime. She prays to God, "the judge of all" for Harry Gill "never more be warm!" (Wordsworth, 2012: 274-75) and from that moment on Harry starts to chatter. Her curse demonstrates that taking refuge in God for justice is the only thing that Goody Blake can do as an old poor woman, because only God embraces everyone as 'equal'.

In the end, the question of equality and justice is resolved when Harry Gill is punished for his bad treatment to Goody Blake. For the first time, they are on equal terms feeling cold and helpless. Goody Blake's curse, in this sense, provides Harry Gill with a feeling of empathy for the poor which he has not felt before. His murmur "Poor Harry Gill is very cold" unveils his empathy for Goody Blake since the adjective "poor" has been used for the first time for Harry Gill (Wordsworth, 2012: 275). After this anti-climax, the moral is uncovered with the last two lines "Now think, ye famers all, I pray / Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill" (Wordsworth, 2012: 275). The poem, in this respect, is finalized by reminding all the other farmers to do justice to the poor who are not lucky to be as wealthy as they are through the story of Goody Blake and Harry Gill. In this sense, Wordsworth does not offer any tangible solution to the problem of inequality and injustice in the end, but only contents himself with giving a moral lesson on the current inequalities in English society by way of Goody Blake's poverty.

3. A political egalitarianist: Percy Bysshe Shelley

Political egalitarianism is one of the popular egalitarianism theories although it has not been discussed and examined enough theoretically. The main argument of political egalitarianism is that "all people are equal in political power or influence" (Gibson et al., 2008: 662). It primarily seeks for democracy, equal rights and equality of all citizens before the law irrespective of their social status, religious belief, race, or material well-being. In this respect, its primary aim is to eliminate double standards that have emerged as a result of some privileges in society by bringing an equal and just system through political means.

Percy Bysshe Shelley is known as an ardent advocate of social justice and a supporter of the working class against inequality and oppression which arose during the post-Industrial Revolution in England. As in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Literary Life*, Michael O'Neil expresses "the nation was living through the painful throes of the Industrial Revolution" and

the establishment of new cities with the “underpaid over-worked labor forces” reinforced Shelley’s concern for social justice and equality (1989: 16). Put another way, since the labor migration from countryside to industrial towns heavily increased during this period, the era was marked by the exploitation of the working class, who had to work for small wages. This prompted Shelley to embrace a political egalitarian outlook, as he believed in the necessity of reformation and revolution to abolish current inequality and injustice. Unlike Wordsworth, whom he once admired and later criticized for betraying these revolutionist ideals, Shelley devoted his life to this cause as an activist.

In spite of being an aristocrat, descended from a Whig family¹³, Shelley reveals a strong desire for total social change through political means to solve the problem of injustice and inequality. He asserts that only egalitarian social change can prepare the grounds for friendly relations among people from different parts of society, because inequality harms every kind of human interaction. However, Shelley’s egalitarian call undergoes a transformation after the Peterloo Massacre (1819)¹⁴, which caused the death of many people in search of social reform and equality. His unfinished prose work “A Philosophical View of Reform”, written in 1820, not only unveils his reformist call’s transition to a furious cry but also forms the basis of his egalitarian world view. In the work, Shelley, as an outsider in Italy who had a chance to look his native country from a distance, demonstrates his awareness of England’s predicaments drawing the picture of contemporary England:

—That the majority of the people of England are destitute and miserable, ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-educated.

—That they know this, and that they are impatient to procure a reform of the cause of this abject and wretched state.

—That the cause of this misery is the unequal distribution which, under the form of the national debt, has been surreptitiously made of the products of their labour and the products of the labour of their ancestors; for all property is the produce of labour. (Shelley, 1920: 50)

Shelley, in fact, points out why reform is necessary by enumerating the problems. For him, idealized social change would only take place in economic terms based on Adam Smith’s ‘labour theory of value’¹⁵ and “believes that wealth is the product of living labour, so that the wealthier the individual, the more labour in fact controls. To diminish excessive wealth is to diminish labour and increase the leisure of the labouring poor” (Scrivener, 1982: 46). In other words, the exploitation of the working class only increases the wealth of the rich, therefore, if the working-class revolts against this exploitation of their labor, a more equal system can be established in society. In this sense, his idea of social change is fundamentally based on the equal rights:

The first principle of political reform is the natural equality of men, not with relation to their property but to their rights. That equality in possessions which Jesus Christ so passionately taught is a moral rather than a political truth and is such as social institutions cannot without mischief inflexibly secure. (Shelley, 1920: 70)

As observed, Shelley's egalitarian view cannot be explained on a moral basis. Especially after seeing the "massive suffering" of the poor during his trip to Ireland, he realized that egalitarianism can only be achieved with political means since the idea of morality as the prerequisite of the egalitarianism was impracticable (White, 1982: 630). He, thereby, adopted political egalitarian notions believing that only "under conditions of freedom men are at liberty to promote social justice and economic equality (though they ought to aspire to them in any circumstance)" (White, 1982: 614), and freedom can only be achieved on the political arena. In this respect, to gain political power and equality should be the main target of the working class to build a more egalitarian system.

Shelley writes mainly about political works through which he aims to reveal the corrupt social hierarchy and tends to change the existing order with reforms and revolution. To this end, he wrote *Popular Songs*, a short volume of poems, which includes "The Mask of Anarchy" "England in 1819" and nine more poems where only three were published during Shelley's lifetime (Scrivener, 1982: 227). "A Song: Men of England" is one of these political songs where Shelley addresses the working class directly to stimulate them to fight against the injustice and oppression. Although composed a few months after the Peterloo Massacre, it was published posthumously because of its political message. To convey his message to the working-class, the uneducated addressee, Shelley adopts a quite simple language with a memorable rhyme scheme (aabb) within the ballad form. Moreover, he uses some tactics to eliminate the gap created by his aristocratic background, and speaks like a proletariat using "ye" instead of "you" throughout the poem to show he can empathize with them and understand their problems.

The poem starts with some rhetorical questions attempting to waken the working-class to the exploitation of their labor. Shelley underlines that they are working for the lords "who lay them low" (Shelley, 2007: 107) and questions their slave-like conditions from which they have no gain:

Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,
Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?
Or What is it you buy so dear
With your pain and with your fear? (Shelley, 2007: 107)

In return for hard labor the proletariat could not even meet his basic needs since the product of the labor is usurped by the rich. In this respect, the seed the proletariat sows is reaped by the rich or wealth the proletariat found kept by the rich. Thus, throughout the poem the members of higher class are depicted as "ungrateful drones", "tyrant", "imposter", or "idle" which again point out the fact that they benefit from the workers productivity and industriousness who toil like "Bees of England" (Shelley, 2007: 107).

Having demonstrated the problems of inequalities and injustice the proletariat has been suffering from with rhetorical questions in the first part, Shelley offers some solutions to attain equal rights and wipe the injustice off in the second part. For this purpose, the last three stanzas are direct call for the proletariat to revolt against the social injustice, exploitation, and oppression by keeping the product to themselves rather than giving it to the rich:

Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
Find wealth—let no imposter heap:
Weave robes—let not the idle wear:
Forge arms—in your defence to bear. (Shelley, 2007: 108)

Furthermore, Shelley encourages the workers to fight back to get what they deserve even if this means to die because he believes that if the workers do not do something to reform the social order in which the richer exploited the poorer, they will never be free from the burden of the upper class. In other words, if the proletariat continues to be submissive to the higher-class oppression, they will dig their own grave with their “plough” and “spade” and “hoe” and “loom” thus, a revolution is inevitable for the sake of social justice (Shelley, 2007: 108).

Conclusion

In Wordsworth’s ‘social poems’ and Shelley’s ‘political poems’, the poets distinctive egalitarian views manifest themselves. That is, Wordsworth, as an advocate of equality, challenges the hierarchical system both in poetry and in society. In his works, he elaborates on common subject matter with a vivid portrayal of the harsh living conditions of the poor; characters from the lower strata in rustic settings; and common language which is no different from prose to defy inherited elitisms. In particular, in “Goody Blake and Harry Gill”, Wordsworth’s luck egalitarianism is unveiled with his vivid depiction of Goody Blake’s harsh living conditions that she no way gets over with hard working in post-Industrial Revolution England. This also relieves her of any moral responsibility of theft crime which is implied with her putting a curse on Harry Gill. Goody Blake’s inherited poverty portrayed in a stark contrast with wealth of Harry Gill ends with the equation of their circumstances. Unlike Wordsworth who founded egalitarianist views on the luck element, Shelley’s sense of equality was grounded on the distribution of political rights. Shelley, as an anarchist and revolutionist, is a more fervent supporter of egalitarianism believing that the social inequalities stemmed from unequal distribution of wealth. However, he considers political egalitarianism as a prerequisite of attaining equal distribution of wealth and property. Propounding that an egalitarian society can only exist with equality in democratic rights, he more directly reveals his revolutionist soul in his political manifesto of egalitarianism. Displaying corrupted hierarchical system and government in “A Song: Men of England”, Shelley both reveals his political protest and stimulates the working class to revolt against the unjust and oppressive system.

To a great extent, the main factor associated with the different attitudes the poets developed towards egalitarianism is the composition dates of their literary works examined in this study (which covers a twenty-year time period between two poems). Needless to say, the socio-economic and political events happened within this time span, in particular the Peterloo Massacre, had a great impact on Shelley and his literary works by leading to an outpouring of his anger and rebellious ideas. In the light of these observations, it can be said that Wordsworth displays a passive and situation-oriented attitude by providing

insights into inequality in English society during the late 18th century, whereas; Shelley, as an activist and reformist, exhibits a solution-oriented attitude in the early 19th century by offering some solutions to overcome this problem. However, neither of these attitudes nor different approaches they developed towards egalitarianism can change one thing they share in common: a desire for an egalitarian world where no one is ‘more equal than others’. This is what makes the different egalitarian perspectives of two renowned romantic poets of different generations, two sides of the coin, two halves of an apple.

Notes

- 1 The exact beginning date of the Industrial Revolution led to some arguments among historians. According to Eric Hobsbawm, most critics tend to date the beginning to the 1760s, but the “take off period” of the Revolution can be dated to the period between 1780 and 1800, which makes it “contemporary with, but slightly prior to the French Revolution” (1996: 29).
- 2 The discrimination between the rich and the poor in the British society reached to such a high degree that the incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Franklin underlined the discrimination by calling the rich and the poor as ‘the two nations’ in his novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845).
- 3 The liberal economic system popularized by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) laissez-faire proposes the operation of economic law without any governmental interference.
- 4 In *The Age of Revolutions 1789-1898*, Eric Hobsbawm points out the difference between the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the French Revolution and notes that “the economy of the nineteenth century world was formed mainly under the influence of the British Industrial Revolution, its politics and ideology were formed mainly by the French” (1996: 53).
- 5 With its full title *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France* was a pamphlet written in 1790 as a refutation to Edmund Burke’s supportive ideas on the monarchy and hereditary privilege in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The pamphlet did not make an overwhelming impression, but another pamphlet published two years later *Vindication of Rights of Woman* (1792) made Wollstonecraft one of the founders of the feminist philosophy by attacking on current gender discrimination in society and laid the groundwork for feminism.
- 6 In the pamphlet *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution*, Thomas Paine, like Mary Wollstonecraft, aimed at negating Edmund Burke’s claims and ideas in the *Reflections*. Calling Edmund Burke “the paradoxical genius” (1945: 250), Paine points out the contradictions in Burke’s arguments and asserts that it was not the monarchy that people had revolted against, but the tyranny and despotic principles of the king Louis the XVIth.
- 7 William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft were husband and wife while Percy Bysshe Shelley’s wife Mary Shelley was their daughter. This kinship network and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s marital affinity are probably significant factors that paved the way for his embracement of their revolutionary ideas on equality and rights of man.
- 8 Before Stoics the view of “fundamental, inherent and innate inequalities” of men predominated in Greece, which was used as a justification for strict class distinction and even slavery by ancient Greek philosophers and critics like Aristotle and Plato. In *Egalitarianism and the Generation of Inequality*, Henry Phelps Brown points out how ordinary and necessary different social ranks were for Greek society by describing them as “the organs of the body, or as the levels of a structure of authority” (1991: 15).
- 9 William Godwin believed that “man is not originally vicious” but he was corrupted by the institutions (1793: 577). In this respect, he holds the political government responsible for all the vices in society and underlines the necessity of its annihilation.
- 10 The egalitarian outlook is also embedded in Wordsworth’s choice of language, subject, setting and characterization. Throughout “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth frequently puts emphasis on the ‘common’ and “real language of men” (2012: 293) and ‘ordinary’ subject of a poem: “The principal object,

then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentiously the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement” (Wordsworth, 2012: 294-95). He brings the elevated language and artful language of poetry closer to the relatively simple language of prose believing that “the essential passions of the heart [...] speak[s] a plainer and more emphatic language” (Wordsworth, 2012: 295). Wordsworth, thereby, challenges the traditional hierarchical enumeration of the poetic genres from epic down to short lyric. In this sense, Wordsworth’s egalitarianist concerns encompass a protest against every sort of hierarchy not only in the social system but also in poetry. Apart from “language”, the use of ‘rural setting’ which centers around “low and rustic life” is another product of Wordsworth’s egalitarianism.

- 11 For Wordsworth the other reason of the poem’s rustic characterization and setting in “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* is their ability to convey their feelings in a clearer way as they are less under the influence of “social vanity” owing to their low status and “the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse” (Wordsworth, 2012: 315).
- 12 In *Lyrical Ballads*, Michael Mason asserts that “Goody is an abbreviation of “good wife” a form of address to a lower-class housewife” (2007: 103). In this sense, the name “Goody” is of importance as it puts emphasis on Goody Blake’s lower-class background.
- 13 Due to the contradiction between his aristocratic background and socialist views, he did not gain admission to the working-class milieu.
- 14 People gathered on St. Peter’s Field on August 16, 1819 to protest the current political and social situation and to support reform. However, the magistrates sent the local militia to disperse the crowd which resulted in the death of many people. This event was called the Peterloo Massacre to draw a comparison with the Battle of Waterloo which is known as a national glory. See, Casaliggi, C. (2016). *Romanticism: A Literary and Cultural History*. London. Routledge.
- 15 According to Adam Smith’s labor theory of value, value is determined rather in accordance with the labor which is required to produce a commodity than the satisfaction the buyer gets from the product. In *Wealth of Nations* Book I Smith indicates that “The real price of everything, what everything really costs to the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it. What everything is really worth to the man who has acquired it, and who wants to dispose of it or exchange it for something else, is the toil and trouble which it can save to himself, and which it can impose upon other people” (qtd in Adam Smith’s *Selected Philosophical Writings* p. 105).

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