

M.A English

Course code :MENG CC205

Course title: 19th Century British Literatures

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The Prisoner of Chillon

The Romantic Movement is both a revolt and a revival. This movement in literature and the revolutionary idealism in European politics are both generated by the same human craving for freedom from traditions and tyranny. The Romantic Movement revives the poetic ideals of love, beauty, emotion, imagination, romance and love for nature. Lord Byron wrote satire, verse narrative, odes, lyrics, speculative drama and confessional poetry. As a true romantic, he championed the cause of liberty in his writings.

The Prisoner of Chillon, is a historical narrative poem in 14 stanzas by Lord Byron published in 1816 in the volume *The Prisoner of Chillon, and Other Poems*. The poem chronicles the political imprisonment of the 16th-century Swiss patriot François Bonivard (who was an ecclesiastical personage, a Bishop) in the dungeon of the château of Chillon on Lake Geneva. He devoted his life to campaign for the cause of liberty and the rights of the people of Switzerland. It is his relentless struggle that encouraged the voice of liberty entirely in the whole Europe.

Bonivard is chained to a post next to his brothers, whom he watches die one by one. Byron's verse tale, written as a dramatic monologue in a simple, direct style, is a moving indictment of tyranny and a hymn to liberty. It was written immediately after

the poet's famous sailing expedition on Lake Geneva with Percy Shelley. While visiting the thirteenth-century Castle of Chillon, Byron must have heard of and felt a great interest in the sad story of the Genevan patriot .Impressed by Bonivard's courageous and principled struggle against the cruelty and tyranny of his captors, Byron used the story to comment further on his already characteristic **themes** of isolation, liberty, oppression, and conviction.

Chillon castle is an island castle located on Lake Geneva in Switzerland. The poem opens with the "Sonnet on Chillon," which reveals, both in content and in style, the influence of Shelley on Byron's work and thought at this time in his career. Byron celebrates the site of Bonivard's imprisonment as consecrated ground, and he praises in exalted and idealistic tones the futility of attempts to constrict the true and free spirit .Byron mainly presents the psychological condition of an individual in confinement. . He celebrates the "Eternal spirit of the chainless mind" in his prefatory "Sonnet on Chillon", and regards Chillon as a symbol of political liberalism

"ETERNAL Spirit of the chainless Mind!

Brightest in dungeons, Liberty! thou art,

For there thy habitation is the heart—

The heart which love of Thee alone can bind."

"And when thy sons to fetters are consign'd,

To fetters, and the damp vault's dayless gloom,

Their country conquers with their martyrdom,

And Freedom's fame finds wings on every wind.

Chillon! thy prison is a holy place

And thy sad floor an altar, for 'twas trod,

Until his very steps have left a trace

Worn as if thy cold pavement were a sod,

By Bonivard! May none those marks efface!

For they appeal from tyranny to God.”

With a revolutionary zeal, Byron hails liberty as an eternal spirit of boundless mind. The champions of liberty are patriots and martyrs who sacrifice their lives for the sake of it. In the first three stanzas, a detailed account of his incarceration is given. Owing to the “Persecution’s rage” (20), the prisoner and his brothers are imprisoned. But we are also told in the same stanzas that they are

“Fettered in hand, but pined in heart” (55).

The life in a dungeon itself is not a painful experience for the speaker, it is rather the death of his brothers that grieves him more. Suppressed more by loss than confinement – he turns into a “wreck” (26). Hence his loneliness and despair are expressed in the following stanzas, where the speaker retells the gradual decline and death of his two brothers. Here, for example, are a few lines from the ninth stanza:

I had no thought, no feeling – none –

Among the stones I stood a stone

,And was, scarce conscious what I wist,

As shrubless crags within the mist;... (253-8)

The speaker, whose “faith” (229) forbids “a selfish death” (230), is now a living dead. Isolation brought about by the death of his kinsmen completely overwhelms him and drives him into

“A sea of stagnant idleness, /

Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless” (249-50).

Still, the prisoner is resilient enough to come to terms with his confinement. The tenth stanza tells that he is visited by “a lovely bird, with azure wings” (268) and that he expects the bird to give him some kind of consolation:

And it was come to love me when

None lived to love me so again

,And cheering from my dungeon’s brink,

Had brought me back to feel and think. (275-8)

In an almost conventional Romantic moment, Bonivard’s despair is interrupted by the arrival of a songbird. The prisoner speculates, with the last vestiges of optimism, that the bird may also have been imprisoned in a cage and has managed to escape. Perhaps, he speculates, the bird might in fact be his brother’s soul visiting him with messages of hope. When the bird flies away, Bonivard feels more alone than ever. Yet miraculously, his captors begin to treat him with more compassion, allowing him to walk around his cell, unchained. He climbs up the wall to get a glimpse through the barred windows of the mountains once again. The beauty of this sight again makes his imprisonment seem more unbearable.

What he seeks here is a Wordsworthian relationship between his mind and the natural world: he tries to revive himself with the help of the bird, a thing of nature. Against his wishes, however, the bird flies away in the end, failing to endow him with consolation. He is forced to remember that “’twas mortal” (290). The speaker is, in this manner, thrust back into the dark reality of his own fate. He is again

“Lone – as the corse within its shroud,

Lone – as a solitary cloud” (293-4).

In his essay on Byron’s view of nature, Edward E. Bostetter maintains that “Byron’s reaction to his [external] world is ambiguous, often contradictory... [4]. This holds true for “The Prisoner of Chillon,” too. Namely, the poet repeatedly lets his hero explore an interaction between human beings and nature, but the exploration does not work. Even though a bird, as we have seen, cannot be a restorative for him, the prisoner does not give up finding comfort in nature. When unchained and permitted to move around in the dungeon, the prisoner looks out of the window so that he may establish a new relationship with the surrounding world. Mountains, snow, the Rhone, a little isle – all these natural things, which are observed from the dungeon, catch his eyes as if they had a power to restore him to life. And yet unlike Childe Harold, who finds a transient solace in the tranquility of Lake Lemman [6], the prisoner cannot get “a rest” (365) in nature:

A small green isle...

And on it there were young flowers growing,

Of gentle breath and hue

.The fish swam by the castle wall,
And they seemed joyous each and all;
The eagle rode the rising blast,
Methought he never flew so fast
As then to me he seemed to fly
,And then new tears came in my eye
,And I felt troubled – and would fain

I had not left my recent chain... (344, 349-358)

The prisoner feels that there is no chance for him to participate in the joyful natural world. .As he gives up Wordsworthian faith in the restorative effects of nature; the universe spreading before him turns into a thoroughly indifferent world. And the speaker goes back to a state of death-in-life without experiencing renewal – even momentarily. The point to note, however, is that the speaker oddly begins to feel at home in the dungeon after his failure in responding to nature. He makes friends with spiders and mice. And the eventual release from the dungeon does not delight him:

My very chains and I grew friends,
So much a long communion tends

To make us what we are: – even I Regained my freedom with a sigh. (389-92).

These lines do not represent the speaker's capacity for adjusting himself to the imprisonment; on the contrary, we may say that they reveal the extremity of his despair. Imprisonment kills his brothers; their death plunges the speaker into the depths of hopelessness, and he can never recover his inner resources. Consequently,

his humanity is devastated and he is reluctant to force himself to regain freedom. Now this psychodrama of confinement reaches its climax – climax which declares the incapability of the prisoner's restoration:

“It was at length the same to me, /

Fettered or fetterless to be, /

I learned to love despair” (372-4).

A psychological investigation of the individual mind reveals a broken ,dejected ,disillusioned person .It is apparent that “The Prisoner of Chillon” gives us a piteous picture of a man whose humanity is destroyed by imprisonment.

Ultimately though, this troubling poem is about disillusionment, and failure. Lord Byron's poetic work “The Prisoner of Chillon” explores the struggle between a person's ending suffering and accepting it rather than holding on to the hope of freedom. The author uses symbols to represent the end of suffering, acceptance of defeat, and succumbing to torture in competition with hope, strength, and faith in eventual freedom.

QUESTIONS :

1.Comment on the the influence of Wordsworth on the thought and style of the poem.

2.*The Prisoner of Chillon* is a moving indictment of tyranny and a hymn to liberty .Discuss

