Prometheus Unbound

Percy Bysshe Shelley · *1820 · original English text*

Shelley's four-act lyrical drama takes the Greek myth of the Titan who stole fire for mankind and was chained to a rock by Jupiter, and gives it a new ending. In the old play by Aeschylus, Prometheus is finally reconciled to Zeus. Shelley refuses that. His Prometheus has endured three thousand years, and the play is about how a tyrant falls and a world is renewed.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What frees a world from tyranny: force, or the refusal of hatred and the power of love?

Prometheus does not fight Jupiter. He takes back his curse, forgives, and holds his ground. Asia, who is Love, goes to the cave of Demogorgon, a dark power, and learns that what rules the world is an eternal principle. Jupiter falls, Prometheus is freed, and the play ends in a long celebration of a renewed world. The poem is more lyric than drama, and its ideas are more than its plot.

KEY CHARACTERS

Prometheus
The Titan who stole fire and holds out against Jupiter.

Jupiter
The tyrant of heaven.

Demogorgon
A dark power who brings Jupiter down.

Asia
The beloved of Prometheus, a figure of Love.

Panthea and Ione
Asia's sisters.

the Earth
Prometheus's mother.

Mercury
Jupiter's messenger.

Hercules
The hero who frees Prometheus.

Grades 11–12
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01
The Preface
PREFACE

Shelley explains that he has changed the old myth, praises Prometheus as a model of moral perfection, and says he wants to give readers beautiful ideals, not didactic rules.

- Shelley says he is unwilling to accept Prometheus's reconciliation.
- He calls Prometheus the type of the highest perfection.
- He wants to offer ideals that will draw readers on.

02
The Ravine in the Caucasus
ACT I

Prometheus, bound to a rock, asks the Earth to repeat the curse he once laid on Jupiter, and then takes it back. Mercury and the Furies come to torment him with visions of suffering, and he does not yield.

- The recalling of the curse is the turning point.
- The Furies show the world's pain.
- Prometheus remains firm.

03
Asia's Journey
ACT II

Asia and Panthea follow dream-messages to the cave of Demogorgon. They ask him about the author of the world and receive an answer that points to eternal Love.

- Asia is the voice of Love.
- Demogorgon is a dark and silent power.
- The answer is partial and symbolic.

04
The Fall of Jupiter
ACT III

Demogorgon rises to the throne of Jupiter, and Jupiter falls into the abyss. Hercules frees Prometheus, who is reunited with Asia, and the Spirit of the Hour announces a new age.

- Jupiter's fall is sudden.
- Hercules unchains Prometheus.
- A new age is announced.

05
The Celebration
ACT IV

Spirits, the Earth, and the Moon sing of a renewed world, and Demogorgon ends the play with a song on the powers that keep evil from returning.

- The act is a series of songs.
- The Earth and the Moon speak.
- Demogorgon's last song warns of what must be kept.

Tyranny and Freedom | Love | Renewal | Forgiveness

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Shelley changed the end of the myth. Ask why.
2. The play is mostly poetry. Notice where the lyrics take over.
3. Prometheus is tormented and does not yield. See what he does instead.
4. The final act is a song of renewal. Ask whether it is convincing.

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