A Critical Study of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”

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1- Abstract

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) is an ostensible romantic poet, who has imparted the English literature with his innovative and immaculate works, that bear witness of his greatness and mastery in writing poetry. Thus, he reflects and outstanding rejection for injustice and oppression in his society through his revolutionary forms. So he is “grown up with violently revolutionary ideas, which contrasted with those of his fathers.”

Shelley’s realization of life is so mature since his early years of study, moreover, he calls for human rights and justice. Thus, he “saw the petty tyranny of school masters and schoolmate as representative of man’s general inhumanity to man, and dedicated his life to a war against all injustice and oppression.”

He refuses to accept life as it is lived and tries to convince the others of the absence of any necessity for doing so, believing that life would be beautiful and an experienced governed by love, “if tyranny, cruelty and the corruption of man by man through jealousy and the exercise of power are removed.”

Shelley urges the people to release their potential power that could change their status in life, so he calls upon them to:

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number!
Shake your chains to earth, like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you
Ye are many, they are few!  

Being strongly concerned with the imaginative faculty purporting to the desired aspect ever sought unrelentingly by active minds, Shelley believes that “the moral customs of a particular era are the result of imaginative vision of great men, and he discovers the ideal aspect of other people which are no already embodied in existing moral codes”

2 Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”

This poem is an outstanding work in Shelley’s poetry. Thus, he wants to invoke the spirit in the wind and not the wind only. So, he treats the wind as a human being, who has a peculiar power to scare the dead leaves, as they are seen by the poet, and to preserve the winged seeds from death. Hence, he used the season of Autumn as an attribute of man’s old age, especially when he describes the dead leaves and the breath of the Autumn’s being:

O wild west wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,
Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead,
Are driven like ghosts, from an enchanter fleeing,

Shelly has employed the clours to be a manifestation to death, that has overwhelmed the leaves and rendered them futile:

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence striken multitudes.

Despite Shelley’s infatuation with the melancholic aspect of death, he urgently combines the gleaming aspect of life, but what
type of life does he present? In fact Shelley believes in drastic change that will purify the world and opens forth the a new horizon of life and hope. So, he addresses the seeds that are deeply buried in the human minds. These seeds are aspiring to be activated and endowed with a new life to bring about a utopian world.

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow.

Here the poet uses the ‘azure,’ mainly because Shelley considers azure or the blue colour of redemption, happiness and peace of the spirit.

The poet puts his imagination on high alert to produce a comprehensive realization for the activities done by the wind. So, he notices that the wind is sometimes wild and aggressive in destroying things, but on the other hand he realizes that the wind is a preserver of life, mainly because it carries the winged seeds to safe places to rid them the destruction and death as he writes:

Wild spirit, which are moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

Moreover Shelley makes use of three objects to represent him in his poetic work, these are: ‘dead leaf, cloud, and wave.’ So, he hopes to be one of these objects to live in harmony with the wind to be united through his body and soul.

If I were a dead leaf, thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power and share.
Shelley desired to obtain that peculiar strength of the wind to restore his youth, he wants even to fly side by side with the wind though he may sacrifice his real existence. Being a dead leaf implies an abstraction of life but in this death Shelley gains an inspiring eternity and everlasting influence on men. So, the poet is not concerned with death through melancholic realization, but through considering death as a way for survival over the dead realities of life.

Shelley petitions to the west wind to rescue and cure him, for he falls on the thorns of life, so he is heavily burdened with his miserable life. He is wounded by this life and he wants somebody to heal his wounds, but to whom shall he resorts? Certainly he chooses the west wind to cure him and resolve his troubles. Thus, he says:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

Integration with the wind is invited in the last part of the poem, for Shelley aspires for being a harmonious object with the wind like the lyre:

Make me thy lyre, as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies.

Once again Autumn is invoked by the poet as a mark of the approaching death, so, the poet wants the wind to regenerate him tragically to be part of nature, portraying himself having leaves that falls and awaits his death. As if the poet could see his impending death. Moreover Shelley has sought the state of unification and
ness with the wind to be incarnated in his soul, beseeching the wind to impart him its fertility and regeneration as he says:

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

The genesis of life is ascribed to the wind as it quickens the life of the seeds. thus, Shelley has assigned the wind a missionary post through spreading his thoughts that are buried in his mind. So the wind can use its supernatural power to convey the poet’s ideas to people who are busy with their materialistic interests. Moreover, he uses the image of death as a way for life, that both are integrated in the process of regeneration, so the mentioning of the first is correlated with the second, as he writes:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!

Shelley’s dreams of renewal and regeneration will not be realized without the vitality of the wind:
Scatter, as from an extinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth.

Finally, Shelley ends his beautiful naturalistic epic of life and death in a panoramic way imparted with splendid hope and aspiration for spring, the season of fertility and love. So, he is obviously an optimistic person in this poem, for his ambitions go beyond traditional life to the metaphysical achievements.

So in this poem Shelley paved the way for revolution and change in the English society and his people through igniting the sparks of their minds to make an active measures to change their
miserable reality. So, it is an invitation for freedom and change through liberating themselves by sacrificing their materialistic life, to maintain that utopian life.

Notes


Note: All citations to Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” are to M. H. Abrams, E Talbot Donaldson etal, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume Two*, ( New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1968)

Bibliography


