

Appreciation of *Ode to the West Wind*

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Abstract

Ode to the West Wind, written by Percy Bysshe Shelley, is considered as a masterpiece in the English literature, even in the whole culture. This paper appreciates this poem mainly from two aspects--metrical analysis and rhetorical devices. The purpose is to explore the deep meaning behind the words and help us understand this poem better.

Keywords: Shelley, west wind, metrical analysis, rhetorical devices.

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INTRODUCTION

Ode to the West Wind, written in 1819, is one of the representative poems of the famous English romantic poet Shelley. At that time, the labor movement and the revolutionary movement of the European countries were surging forward. The British working class and the proletariat in order to safeguard their own interests and strive for their own freedom and rights, launched a lot of heroic struggle with the bourgeoisie. But the bourgeois rulers brutally suppressed the working class and the proletariat. Under this background, Shelley wrote the *Ode to the West Wind* full of grief and indignation. The poem is full of romanticism. Literally, the poet is praising the west wind. But in essence, it not only deeply criticized the social reality but also expressed the optimistic spirit of winning the future revolution. The poem contains a variety of rhetorical and symbolic techniques.

I. Artistic Conception

Ode to the West Wind consists of five sonnets and each of them showing one different aspect of the thought. The first part describes the wind in the forest, where the leaves are driven like ghost before the wind, and the seeds are swept up to come down again in their wintry beds. The second part pictures the wind in the sky, driving the clouds and the rain. In the third, we see the wind blowing over the sea, where quiet waters are

about to be churned up into fury. In the fourth part the poet states, his reason for the prayer that he must make. In the last part there is the prayer itself, and the central meaning of the poem. And these five stanzas can be divided into two parts. The first three stanza mainly describe the influence of the west wind on land, sea and sky. At this time, the west wind seems to be a new force, which blows everything rotten fiercely and brings new hope to the world. There is a turn at the beginning of the forth stanza, the focus is now on the speaker, or better the hearer and what he is going to hear. In the last two stanzas, the poet compares himself to the west wind, showing the poet's strong desire to join the revolution and his firm faith in the bright future.

II. Metrical Analysis

A. Sound and Sense

The first stanza begins with semivowel /w/ in the first sentence. Shelley has reinforced the onomatopoeic effect with the repeated use of /w/, which sounds like as if the wind is truly howling, setting off its strength and destructive power through its forceful melody. In the "those unseen presence the leaves dead", there are many fricatives like /s/ and /z/, which makes the reader feel more concretely the howling of the west wind. In addition, consonants are used many times in the poem, especially the plosives such as /b/, /p/, /d/, /k/. These plosives are harsher and sharper in their effect, thus they can reinforced the

destructive force of the west wind. Diphthongs such as /au/, /ai/, /ei/ are used many times in the fourth stanza and these diphthongs are in general pleasing and melodious. And the “long” vowel such as /i:/ is used, which will be fuller and more resonant than the “short” vowel. Both diphthongs and “long” vowels give the reader a strong sense of pleasure.

B. Rhythm and Meter

Alliteration is an important kind of phonetic stylistic devices, and it can be added to the musical quality of poem. Beside which, alliteration is sometimes used to imitate some sound in life to make the language more vivid and impressive and increase the rhythm of the language. The poem begins with the alliteration “wild west wind”. The immediate repeated /w/ signifies the wail of the dense and long breath of the west wind. This makes the “wind” sound invigorating and the reader gets the impression that the wind is something that lives. Many rhymes such as /əu/s in the “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” are used. In addition, the rhyme often appears in the blasting sounds such as /d/, /t/ and fricative sounds such as /f/, /s/, reproducing the scene of the west wind sweeping over the whole old world and thus emphasizing more on the destruction of the west wind to the old world.

Each of the seven parts of “Ode to the West Wind” contains five stanzas—four three-line stanzas and a two-line couplet, all metered in iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme in each part follows a pattern known as Terze Rima, the three-line rhyme scheme employed by Dante in his Divine Comedy. In the three-line Terze Rima stanza, the first and third lines rhyme, and the middle line does not; then the end sound of that middle line is employed as the rhyme for the first and third lines in the next stanza. The final couplet rhymes with the middle line of the last three-line stanza. Thus each of the seven parts of “Ode to the West Wind” follows this scheme: ABA BCB CDC DED EE.

III. Rhetorical devices

A. Personification

Personification is a figure of speech that gives human forms of feelings to animals, or life and personal attributes to inanimate objects, or to ideas and abstractions, thus we can describe things more vividly by using it. And the use of personification in poem enhances the appeal of language.

We can see personification all over this poem. For example, in “O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being”, Shelley describes the west wind as “breath of Autumn’s being”, the poet uses the personification like “breath” to help describe the west wind scatters the dead leaves and spreads seeds, and he is personifying not only the west wind but also the

autumn. Here the poet also gives us an image that the west wind is “destroyer and preserver”.

In “Thine azure sister of the Spring”, here the poet personifying the west wind of spring as “azure sister”. “azure” refers to the clear blue of the cloudless skies of Spring, but the sentence as a whole relates to the gentle west wind of Spring, more maternal than Autumn’s wind. At this point in the stanza there is a distinct shift in the mood, anticipating the gentler and more pastoral time of Spring, with a noticeably more dream-like, soft and gentle mood.

In “Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in the air”, the poet personifying the west wind as a shepherd. The spring buds are like flock of sheep, and the west wind drives them to breathe fresh air like a shepherd herding sheep.

In the third stanza, in “Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams”, the poet personifying the west wind to describe the great power of the west wind in sea. The poet also uses a series of anthropomorphic words or phrases such as “lay”, “lull”, “saw in sleep”, which depict the calm and serenity of the Mediterranean. It’s a stark contrast with “quivering”, which describes the destructive power and magnificent momentum of the west wind.

B. Simile

Simile and metaphor are both used as a means of comparing things that are essentially unlike. The only distinction between them is that in simile the comparison is expressed by the use of some word or phrase, such as like, as, than, similar to, resembles, or seem; in metaphor, the comparison is not expressed but is created when a figurative term is substituted for or identified with the literal term.

In sentence “like ghost from an enchanter fleeing” of the first stanza, the poet compares leaves as ghosts. Through this simile, the poet let the reader deeply understand his deep hatred of the dark old power.

The second stanza begins with the sentences “Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky’s commotion, Loose clouds like earth’s decaying leaves are shed” and “Angles of rain and lightening: there are spread”, here the clouds are compared to earth’s decaying leaves and dangles of rain and lightening. In a biblical way, they may be messengers that bring a message from heaven down to earth through rain and lightning.

In “Like the bright hair uplifted from the dead Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge Of the horizon to the zenith’s height, The locks of the approaching storm”, the poet compares locks of cloud to the bright hair of Maenad. And here by employ

simile, it express the majestic momentum of the west wind.

C. Allusion

For an allusion--a reference to something in history or previous literature--is, like a richly connotative word or a symbol, a means of suggesting far more than it says. It is a mean of reinforcing the emotion or the ideas of one's own with the emotion or ideas of another work or occasion. Because they may compact so much meaning in so small a space, they are extremely useful to the poet. In this poem, Shelley uses allusions such as "Destroyer and preserver" in "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; Destroyer and preserver; hear, O, hear!". The wind possesses these two attributes, coupled also with its role as Creator. In Hindu mythology the three principal gods are Siva (Destroyer), Brahma (Creator) and Vishnu (Preserver), and it is significant that the poet invokes all three gods as manifested in the one abstract force of the west wind. This phrase neatly expresses the ambivalent attitude which Shelley feels towards the wind.

The second example is "Maenads" in the second stanza. The Maenads were female follows of the Greek god Dionysus, the god of wine and wild revelry, who were observed to be possessed with the spirit of frenzy and excess. Here Shelley draws on the associations of this classical reference to create a vivid impression of the dancing Maenads, their hair streaming out and up into the air, likened to the water raised by the waterspouts, a further image of demonic possession.

And there are some other allusions such as "Baiae's bay" in the third stanza. "Baiae's bay" is an area west of Naples, a notoriously volcanic area and a former tourist resort in Roman times. In 1818 Shelley had taken a boat trip in the Bay and observed "the ruins of its antique grandeur standing like rocks in its transparent sea under our boat". The Roman town had been renowned for its luxury, immorality and even cruelty. By this allusion Shelley seems to imply that beneath the bay's temporary tranquility lies a cataclysmic change (revolution, for example).

D. Symbolism

Symbolism may be roughly defined as something that means more than what it is. In this poem there are so many symbolism. Besides giving us a description of nature, "Ode to the West Wind" also expresses the poet's revolutionary spirit. Shelley was in a sense a rebel against human formulas and dull convention. He hated any form of authority and oppression. He felt like a mortal being chanced by time and wished to be free.

In the first stanza, west wind crushes dry weeds and smashes rotten woods on land, sweeps the seeds into earth at the same time, and the poet described

it as the "destroyer" and "preserver". "Destroyer" means that people should sweep all the old ideas, which are the blocks to the revolution. Only when people change their thoughts thoroughly, can they achieve the revolution. "Preserver" means that there may be something useful, which should be preserved. The withered leaves and the west wind are the main images. The leaves blown off by the west wind are the symbols of decadent ideas. The old world, old things and old ideas also wither with the leaves of the west wind, while the scattered seeds give birth to new things, new ideas and new world.

In the third stanza, the poet mainly chants the west wind and describes the power of the west wind in land, sea and air. Here the blue Mediterranean symbols the rulers of the time. Therefore, this part further shows the powerful strengths of break of the west wind. From the last two lines we can see the old power will perish. The poet combine the main images, the west wind, with seawater, huge waves and old palace to express that the old world would must be placed by a new world.

In the last two stanza, the poet turn from ode to the west wind to express emotions to convey his willing to dance with the west wing. The poet express his yearning for meeting the windstorm as the flying withered leaves in the wind, floating clouds and tumbling waver did. In "Make me thy lyre", the poet uses the image of lyre as a symbol of the relationship between the mind of man and the external world. For Shelley, the human mind could be linked to the strings of a lyre, which makes music when the wind blows through the strings and creates both melody and harmony. At this point, the poet makes the direct connection with his need to be inspired by seeing the west wind's power, and the impact made by the west wing on forests, creating harmonies in his own mind.

In "Driven my dead thoughts over the universe", the wind, as a force of inspiration, will enable him to spread his thought across the universe, both awakening the "embers" of his art, and also the political urgency of the thought itself. The last sentence "if winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" is the most famous. The wind here has become a symbol and it stands for a universal spirit that appears in everywhere. And it is the west wind spirit that challenges to beak the old world and establish a new world. In addition, the west wind also gives readers the hope that the triumph must be the final result and that dark will soon pass and light is in sight.

CONCLUSION

In the poem the poet describes vividly the activities of the west wind on the earth, in the sky and on the sea, and then express his envy for the boundless freedom of the west wind and his deep love for freedom and democracy. What's more, the poet wants his message of revolution spread and the wind become the

trope for spreading it. This poem as the expression of the revolutionary spirit of the poet helps us to see the social, historical and political background of the society in the Romanticism Era. It shows both the spirit of the age and the spirit of the poet. In terms of the social background, Shelley compares the revolution and the new ideas to the west wind. In terms of himself, Shelley compares himself to the west wind, which encourages himself to stick to his ideals and achieves the final triumph. Ode to the West Wind with its strong feelings and magical imagination let us full of hope, to wish the future society becoming brilliant.

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