

Give a critical appreciation of the poem "Ode to the West Wind," by Percy Bysshe Shelley

In "Ode to the West Wind," Percy Bysshe Shelley tries to gain transcendence, for he shows that his thoughts, like the "winged seeds" are trapped. The West Wind acts as a driving force for change and rejuvenation in the human and natural world. Shelley views winter not just as last phase of vegetation but as the last phase of life in the individual, the imagination, civilization and religion. Being set in Autumn, Shelley observes the changing of the weather and its effects on the internal and external environment. By examining this poem, the reader will see that Shelley can only reach his sublime by having the wind carry his "dead thoughts" which through an apocalyptic destruction, will lead to a rejuvenation of the imagination, the individual and the natural world.

Shelley begins his poem by addressing the "Wild West Wind". He quickly introduces the theme of death and compares the dead leaves to "ghosts". The imagery of "Pestilence-stricken multitudes" makes the reader aware that Shelley is addressing more than a pile of leaves. His claustrophobic mood becomes evident when he talks of the "wintry bed" and "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." (7-9) In the first line, Shelley uses the phrase "winged seeds" which presents images of flying and freedom. The only problem is that they lay "cold and low" or unnourished or not elevated. He likens this with a feeling of being trapped. The important word is "seeds" for it shows that even in death, new life will grow out of the "grave." The phrase "winged seeds" also brings images of religions, angels, and/or souls that continue to create new life. Heavenly images are confirmed by his use of the word "azure" which besides meaning sky blue, also is defined, in Webster's Dictionary, as an "unclouded vault of heaven." The word "azure," coupled with the word "Spring," helps show Shelley's view of rejuvenation. The word "Spring" besides being a literary metaphor for rebirth also means to rise up. In line 9, Shelley uses soft sounding phrases to communicate the blowing of the wind. This tercet acts as an introduction and a foreshadow of what is to come later.

Shelley goes on to talk of the wind as a "Destroyer and Preserver" which brings to mind religious overtones of different cultures such as Hinduism and Native Indian beliefs. The poem now sees a shift of the clouds which warns of an upcoming storm. This helps Shelley begin to work towards a final climax. He then writes of the mourning song "Of the dying year, to which this closing night/ Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre/ Vaulted with all they congregated might" (23-25). Again, the reader feels somewhat claustrophobic. The "closing night" feels as if it is surrounding the author as he writes and the reader as he or she reads. The "closing night" is used also to mean the final night. Shelley shows how he cannot have a transcendence even in an open sky for even the sky is a "dome." The "sepulchre" is a tomb made out of rock and his imagination and the natural world will be locked and "Vaulted" tight. But in following lines Shelley writes how this "sepulchre" will "burst." In that sense, "Vaulted" takes on the meaning of a great leap and even a spring. Shelley uses the phrase "congregated might" not just to mean a collaborative effort, but to represent all types of religion. Shelley seems to use oblique phrasing to frighten the reader and to show the long breath of the wind.

Shelley wants the reader to visualize the "dome" as having a presence like a volcano. And when the "dome" does "burst," it will act as a "Destroyer and Preserver" and creator. The use of the words "Black rain and fire and hail..." (28) also helps the reader prepare for the apocalyptic climax which Shelley intended.

As the rising action continues, Shelley talks of the "Mediterranean" and its "summer dreams". In the dream, the reader finds the sea laying "Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay/ And saw in sleep old palaces and towers/ Quivering within the wave's intenser day" (32-34). Shelley implants the idea of a volcano with the word "pumice." The "old palaces and towers" stir vivid images of ancient Rome and Greece in the readers mind. Shelley also uses these images in the sea's dream to show that the natural world and the human social and political world are parallel. Again, he uses soft sounding words, but this time it is used to lull the reader into the same dream-like state of the Mediterranean. The "pumice" shows destruction and creation for when the volcano erupts it destroys. But it also creates more new land. The "pumice" is probably Shelley's best example of rebirth and rejuvenation. The word "Quivering" is not just used to describe the reflection of images in the water. It is also used to show a sense of fear which seems to be the most common mood and emotion in this poem. Is Shelley perhaps making a comment that at the root of people's faith is fear of vengeful god? Maybe, but the main focus of this poem is not just religion, but what religion stands for which is death and rebirth. Could line 34, also be a comment on Shelley himself?



In the final stanzas, Shelley has the wind transforming from the natural world toward human suffering. Shelley pleads with the wind: "Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!" (54). He seeks transcendence from the wind and says: "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed". Shelley shows Christ not as a religion, but as a hero of sacrifice and suffering, like the poet himself. He again pleads for the wind: "Drive my dead thought over the universe...to quicken a new birth!" (63-64). He asks the wind to "Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth/ Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind! / Be through my lips to unawakened Earth" (66-68). The words "unextinguished hearth" represent the poet's undying passion. The "hearth" is also at the centre of the earth which helps make the connection between humanity and nature. Both are constantly trying to reinvent themselves. When one scatters "ashes" it's at one's death and that person becomes one with the earth. When one scatters "sparks" it is these sparks that create new fires of creation and destruction.

These new "sparks" arise when the "dome" explodes and abandons old ways. Can one ever escape the roots of creation? Shelley has many Blakean overtones of creation and destruction in the final tercet of this poem: Shelley's says that his lips are the "trumpet of prophecy". And many say that Wordsworth is egotistical? Again, he uses biblical sounding words to add drama and importance to his prophetic vision. And it definitely helps achieve Shelley's intended climax when he asks with hope: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? This sentence could be rewritten substituting the word death, for the word "Winter," and the word rebirth, could take the place of "spring."

Shelley, like all of the Romantic poets, constantly tries to achieve a transcendence to sublime. In "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley uses the wind as a power of change that flows through history, civilization, religions and human life itself. Does the wind help Shelley achieve his transcendence? It seems it has in some sense, but Shelley never achieves his full sublime. In poems such as "Stanzas written in Dejection Near Naples" Shelley uses images of "lightning" and "flashing" which help demonstrate that he can only attain a partial sublime unlike a poet like William Wordsworth. Perhaps that's why he tries to give rebirth to his individual imagination. One can never restart totally new. Even the trees that will grow from "the winged seeds" are not totally new, but that is the point Shelley is trying to make. He feels himself to be part of a continuing cycle. Since Shelley is an atheist the only way his soul can live on is through the "incantation" of his words. So, if his transcendence is to live on in eternity and create inspiration and change in others like the West Wind, then he has achieved something greater than he could have imagined. But whether he grasped a complete transcendence for himself while he was alive remains to be answered. It seems that it is only in his death that the "Wild Spirit" could be lifted "as a wave, a leaf, a cloud" to blow free in the "Wild West Wind."