

**Research Article**

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**Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” as the Reflection and  
Expression of the Romantic Era**

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**Abstract**

Literary works usually act as a mirror of the society is life. A literary work can represent historical, social and political background of an era. A poem as one of literary works can do the same thing. In this paper, the writer took the *Ode to the West Wind* by Shelley, that is as the reflection of the Romantic Age. The writer used the historical approach to understand the historical background of the Romantic Period, and the aspect of the Romanticism era to explore the contain of the poem. The result shows that *Ode to The West Wind* is really reveals the condition of that era.

**Keywords:** Romanticism; imagination; individual; the post; nature.

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**1. Introduction**

Literary works usually act as a mirror of the society’s life in which they are produced, or in other words we can say that the literary works act as the time spirit of an era. When and what kind of situation the literary works are produced are really describe a period of time. A literary work, thus, can represent historical, social and political background of an era.

**2. Methods**

A poem as one of literary works can do the same thing. In this paper, the writer took the “*Ode to the West Wind*” as the reflection of the Romantic Age. The writer used historical approach to understand the background and the aspects of Romanticism.

**3. Results**

*3.1. The Romantic Periode (1798-1832)*

In England, this was a turbulent period in political and economic history, during which England was eperiencing the ordeal of the change from its former status as a primarily agricultural society, where wealth and power had been largely concentrated in the landholding aristocracy, to a recognizably modern industrial nation in which the balance of economic power was shifted to large-scale employers, who found themselves ranged against an immensely enlarging and increasingly restive working class. And this change because of the American and then of the much more radical French Revolution, of wars, of economic cycles of inflation and depression, and of the constant threat to the social structure from imported revolutionary ideologies to which the ruling classes responded by heresy –huts and the repression of traditional liberties (Abrams, 1962: 901) <sup>[1]</sup>.

The early period of the French Revolution, marked by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the storming of the Bastille to release the imprisoned political offenders, evoked enthusiastic support from English liberal and radicals alike. In England this period of the errifying threat of the revolutionary spirit at home was one of harsh repressive measures. "Public meeting were prohibited, any movement towards revolution or social reform was blocked, the events in France nevertheless shifted the foundation of thought" (Davies, 1990: 238).<sup>[2]</sup>

Many of the major writers (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley), however, did feel that there was something distinctive about their time—not a shared doctrine or literary quality, but a persuasive intellectual climate, which some of them called "the spirit of the age". They had the sense that "great spirit now an earth are sojourning", and that there was evidence all about of that release of energy, experimental boldness, and creative power which mark a literary renaissance. They also thought civilization made man evil. Civilization imposes rules of behavior, restricted man's freedom. As the city is the symbol of civilization, the writers turned their attention away from it, and began to look at the country side, the villages, the farms, and of course, the farmers and their works on the farms.

In Romantic literature, there is a tendency to represent life as it is not, that is unrealistic, as a product of the imagination rather than that of reason. The imagination of Romantic writers was preoccupied with the fact and idea of the American and later, the French Revolution (Davies, 1990: 239). By breaking free from outmoded concepts and institutions, man might also escape the oppression and suffering which had hitherto seemed the inescapable condition of his existence, and establish a new and joyous world of liberty, equality and fraternity (Abrams, 1962: 906).

Some of the aspects of English Romanticism are:

1. Faith in the imagination: feeling and intuition are given a more important part in life. Rules give way to freedom in writing.
2. Faith in the individual: interest in man as an individual, with his individual feelings and ideals, thought etc. This interest in individuality grew side by side with the spread of democracy which started in America and France.
3. Interested in the past: Medieval or gothic romances became popular again. History and legend were blended and stories from the past with their mysterious settings were taken up again with renewed interest.
4. Interest in nature and the common man: Any collection of Romantic poems will indicate the astonishing degree to which the natural scene and its flora and fauna have become a primary poetic subject (Abrams, 1962: 909)

### 3.2. *The "Ode to the West Wind" as the Reflection of Romanticism Era*

In the "*Ode to the West Wind*", there are five parts, each 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.

Some aspects in the "*Ode to the West Wind*" are:

#### 3.2.1. Faith in the Imagination

From the first part until to the last part of the poem, there are full of imagination. In the first part the poet represents the wind as a being, that indeed it is just what he calls it, a spirit, meanwhile "thine azure sister of the spring shall blow her clarion" is the imagination for the reviving wind that will blow in the spring.

The dying year and this closing night in the second part are the imagination of the end of the year. This closing night will be the dome of a vast sepulchre, it refers to the autumn season which is over and

replaced by the next season, winter.

In the third part azure moss, flowers, the sea-blooms and the oozy woods are imagery for the sea plants.

..., while far below  
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear  
The sapless foliage of ocean, know  
Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear  
And tremble and despoil them selves; oh, hear!  
The foliage of the sea plants also falls in the autumn season

In the fourth part, the poet wants to accompany the wind's travel over the world. Besides that the poet regards the wind as the most powerful thing, so that he begins praying to the wind in his sorrow. The poet asks the wind to lift him up, to restore the power he has lost.

In the fifth part contains of the poets prayer  
Drive my dead thoughts over the Universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!

The poet wants the strong wind to take his dead thoughts away, for he wants to forget his past life, in order to rebuild a new life, which is better than it used to be. Dead thought suggests the poet's bad past life.

And by the incantation of this verse 60  
Setter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and Sparks, my words among mankind!

Through the magical power of this poem, the poet hopes his poems (my words) are known by people and the wind will spread them over the world. Sparks are imagery for the poet's poems that he will write in the future. Spark is "a tiny bit of burning matter thrown off by something that is very hot or a fire" (Urdang and Flesner, 1968: 1260).<sup>[3]</sup> Though it is only a flash, there is still hope that it will be great fire.

"Unextinguished hearth" is the imagination of the poet's own life. He compares his life to it, since though he feels despair and hopeless, his enthusiasm and efforts to restore the power he has lost will never die.

### 3.2.2. Faith in the Individual

In the "*Ode to the West Wind*", the poet can express his individual feeling, ideals and thought freely. He never become the speaker of any institutions, for examples: the Kingdom, or the Parties, to speak out their hopes or thought. The poet in this poem can liberate him self from the influence of other people or institution, so that the poet can speak out whatever he wants through his poem.

The poet is in a sense a rebel against human formulas and dull conventions. He hated any form of authority and oppression and hopes that such situation could be changed soon.

### 3.2.3. Interest in the Past

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay  
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers  
Quivering within the wave's intense days

'This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, Italy' (Rose Benet and Aiken, 1945: 248) <sup>[4]</sup>, and "The bay of Baja" (the Baiae's bay), is a small town near Naples. In the west near Baja are the ruin of palaces and temples dating from Roman times,"...(Kooistra and Schutt, 1948: 230).<sup>[5]</sup> They have already sink in the deep sea, but when the sea is calm, we can see

the ruins of the old palaces and towers. Here, story from the past with their mysterious setting are taken up again with renewed interest.

Like the bright hair uplifted from the head  
Of some fierce Maenad,...

Maenad is a female, votary who danced frenziedly in the worship of Dionysus (or Bacchus), the Greek God of wine and vegetation. As vegetation god, he was fabled to die in the fall and to be resurrected in the spring; hence, there is a glancing allusion here to a mythic cycle of death and rebirth (Abrams, 1962: 1299). In this lines, history and legend from Greek Mythology are used to show the slow moving of the storm is like the hair of someone submerging in water or of a wild dancer.

### 3.2.4. Interest in Nature and the Common Man

In this poem there are so many imageries of nature: woodland, sky, cloud, sea, leaves, wind, that dominant in the rest of the poem. The poet used nature to express his hopes and thought.

Meanwhile the speaker from this poem is not a king, a queen or someone from the Royal family; he is just a man, a common man who wants to make the life of the common men better than ever - free from oppression and unfair treatment. This poem is dignified and addressed to common men. (Spender, 1971: 58).<sup>[6]</sup>

### 3.3. "Ode to the West Wind" as the spirit of the poet

Before discussing "Ode to the west wind" at the spirit of the poet, it is much better to talk about Shelley's life in order to analyze the relation between his experience and creative process of his writing and, the chronology of his time in order to help us to see the social, historical and political background of the society in the Romantism Era.

#### 3.3.1. Shelley's Life

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born on August 4th, 1792 in Sussex, England. His father was a hardheaded and conventional member of parliament. Shelley was in a sense a rebel against human formulas and dull conventions. He hated any form of authority and oppression. Although he was a rebel, he actually came from a solidly conservative background. He came from upper class, his ancestors being Sussex aristocrats.

As a noble young man, he was sent to be educated at Eton and Oxford (1810, Oct). In 1811, he was expelled from Oxford, because he circulated a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*. This book is a protest against the popular interpretation of God which was current at the time.

In the same year, he went to London. There, he met Harriet Westbrook, daughter of a London publican, and married her. In 1813 he wrote his first important poem, *Queen Mab*. "This is a revolutionary poem on marriage and atheism, which once for all spoilt his reputation with large section of the public" (Schutt in Dent:228).<sup>[7]</sup>

In the following year, in 1814, Shelley eloped to Prance with Mary Godwin, the brilliant daughter of a radical politician, William Godwin. When Shelley came back to London his family and his friends blamed his deed.

When he returned to London, Shelley found that the general public, his family and most of his friends regarded him not only as an atheist and revolutionary, but also as an immoralist (Abrams: 413).

After Harriet, who was legally still his wife, had committed suicide, Shelley married Mary, and in 1818 the young couple moved to Italy and settled there until his death.

While he was living in Italy, his life was getting worse. His health was bad, he was harried by



that the West Wind might lift him up to fly with the wind. He feels as if he were chained and bound (by time), but that he was like the wind itself: came less, swift and proud. Again an expression of his revolutionary spirit.

The fifth part contains his prayer.

Be thou, spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!  
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth;  
And by the incantation of this verse,  
Scatter, as from an unextinguished heart  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

Here Shelley asks the West Wind to be his spirit and to give him its spirit as well, to restore the power he has lost. “The poet represents himself as experiencing a crisis of the spirit; he is at the point of despair, and in his extremity he invokes the aid of the autumn wind, asking that it give him its wild energy” (Trilling, 1967: 889)

Be through my lips to unawakened earth  
The trumpet of prophecy!...

We know that the poet was a radical person. He hated the people’s ways of life at the time. He asks the wind to be his lips and blows the trumpet to call the people that time has come to change their ways of life. Once again, these lines show Shelley’s revolutionary spirit.

He also wrote the “Ode to the West Wind” in which his abstract symbolism is, for once, brilliantly controlled, and makes the natural force of the wind into a convincing metaphor for political revolution. (Davies, 1990: 905)

#### **4. Conclusion**

If the neo-classic period was a predominantly a period of prose, the romantic period was one of poetry, which is understandable since it is poetry that appeals to the imagination. Imagination and the other aspects in the “Ode to the West Wind” reflect the characteristic of Romanticism period. Besides, the 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. The literary construct can be achieved through this poem because it shows the spirit of the age and it shows the spirit of the poet as well.

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