

An Analysis on the Concept of Nature in Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*

Zhang Lu

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, 110136, China

Keywords: the concept of nature, development, outmoded, newborn

Abstract: In the modern society, the harmony between man and nature becomes the theme of the time. If we date back to the Romantic period of British and American literature, it's easy for us to find the concept of nature. Through the images of nature in the poems written by Shelley, we can find his views on nature. Although Shelley's poems are usually famous for the revolutionary ideas, there are natural ideas and concepts in some of his well-known poems. This article sets the sight on Shelley's poem *Ode to the West Wind*, tries to find out the themes and views on nature through analyzing the nature images of his poem.

1. Introduction

As we know, Shelley was one of the famous romantic lyric poets during his time. He was famous for its poems. He with Byron and many other poets became the representatives of Romantic Period. Nature is the subjective matter in the romantic poetry. Concepts of nature have been existed in the literary works for a long time. And the concept of nature varies as the time goes by. For Shelley, nature is the suitable means to symbolize the ideal society in his mind. He hopes to tell his progressive beliefs and ideas to the public by presenting the natural ability in his poems. His poems are full of vigor and passion, and they reveal the strong desire of Shelley's beliefs. His poems fill with images of nature. The description of nature suggests the rules of nature. Like his poems *Ode to the West Wind*, the rules of the nature are well-presented.

Nature, for Shelley, is a source of truth and knowledge. It teaches people many truths and ways of thinking about their life. Everything in the world is moving, changing and developing. Each kind has its own rules and principles. Nature changes under its own rules and laws as well. Everything changes constantly and exists eternally in the universe. In *Ode to the West Wind*, Shelley presents us the essence of development: The outmoded parts are completely discarded and the good, valuable parts should be preserved. Shelley thinks that the old, outmoded and dark things pollute the pure life of people and the society. It should be eliminated. The newborn things are more suitable for the changing world. And they can promote the world to be more progressive. Because of their weakness, the newborn things should be supported and protected so that they can survive in the changing society. So people should be the main force which can destroy the bad and outmoded things, preserve the rational ones and help the newborn things to improve our society. This spirit of being "the Destroyer" as well as being "the Preserver" is called "the spirit of West Wind" which comes from Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*.

2. The Development in Nature

In nature, all the creatures develop under their own rules. The dead leaves fall down in winter and the new green leaves will grow in the spring; flowers die in winter and have new buds in spring. Almost all the things wake up when spring comes. In the poem, Shelley describes a picture which presents the later autumn before a storm in Italy. In the poem, the west wind like the "breath of Autumn's being", it destroys all the bad and dead things in winter. The west wind is a "Wild Spirit". It symbolizes the power which destroys the earth, disarranges the air and disturbs the ocean.

2.1 "The Destroyer"

In the first canto, Shelley describes the scene on the earth. "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./Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,/Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O Thou,/Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed/The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,/Each like a corpse within its grave” The west wind drives “the leaves dead” away. It blows strongly, like a strong power to destroy all the dead creatures. It’s so powerful that the dead things are frightened to see him. The wild west wind symbolizes death. The dead leaves are compared to be the “Pestilence-stricken multitudes” in the dead color of “Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red”. When they meet the west wind, they are going to die doubtlessly, so they flee away like ghost. All these dead things are cleaned by the west wind. The “winged seeds” are cast away by west wind and thrown into the “wintry bed”, “like a corpse within its grave”.

In the second canto, Shelley turns to the sky. “Thou on whose stream, ’mid the steep sky’s commotion,/Loose clouds like Earth’s decaying leaves are shed,/Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,” Because of it, “the steep sky” is in commotion. “Loose clouds” are blown by the wild wind, like “earth’s decaying leaves are shed”. Wild west wind tangles with the loose clouds, blows them rising up from the ocean and mixes them together. “Thou Dirge Of the dying year, to which this closing night/ Will be the dome of a vast sepulcher,/ Vaulted with all thy congregated might of vapors” the west wind blows the loose clouds and makes them to mix together with the vapor from the ocean. These mixed vapors in the sky form a dome which just likes “the dome of a vast sepulcher”.

The third canto is the description of the ocean when the west wind passes. The west wind also blows into the ocean and destroys the dead things in the sea. “Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams/ the blue Mediterranean,” the west wind breaks the tranquility of the ocean and wakes the Mediterranean from his dreams. When the west wind comes, the “old palaces and towers” in sleep are becoming “Quivering within the wave's intenser day.” The Atlantic’s level powers also cleave themselves into chasms. “While far blow/ the sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear/ the sapless foliage of the ocean, know/ thy voice, and suddenly grow grey with fear,/ and tremble and despoil themselves: O hear!” Deep in the bottom of the sea, all the sea-blooms, the oozy woods, the sapless foliage tremble with fear. They are all afraid of the wild wind.

Shelley describes the west wind as a strong power to destroy the old, dead, and bad things. It takes the dead, pale, yellow leaves away; it brings the storm and makes the earth like a big grave with gloomy atmosphere. It breaks the tranquility of the ocean and troubles the things in the bottom of the sea. Because of it, the whole nature is shocked and changed. The name "destroyer" is very suitable for this “Wild Spirit”.

2.2 “The Preserver”

The west wind also preserves the valued parts. So in this sense, we call it “the Preserver”. “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”. In the poem, the word “winged” drops us a hint. It leaves us an impression of angel and symbolizes newborn, energy and hope. Though the “winged seeds” are thrown into the “wintry bed”, they must be reborn until the “azure sister of the Spring shall blow her clarion over the dreaming earth”, “Seeds” are the basis for the plants’ lives and they are the symbol of new life. So in the poem, the word “seeds” shows that even in death, new life will grow out of the “grave”. From the sentence “Her clarion o’er the dreaming earth, and fill/ (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)/ with living hues and odours plain and hill”, the west wind and its azure sister of the Spring form a contrast. The west wind is so rude and strong that it blows away all the things that winter leaves. While its sister, the spring, wakes the whole world up lightly and mildly. It makes the dead things come to their lives in the new season. And she also brings new lives to the nature. This indicates that the dead or old creations must be replaced by the new buds of their own kinds.

In the sky, the West Wind blows the loose clouds and the vapors from the ocean. The formed dome is going to burst because in the dome, there is the “congregated might of vapors”. It is easy to understand that the dome is ready to welcome the coming of the “angels of rain and lightning”.

Maenad symbolizes happiness and spree. When the rain and lightning come, the “vast sepulcher” set itself free and burst, just like a spree. According to Shelley, the west wind is compared to Maenad. “From whose solid atmosphere/ Black rain and fire and hail will burst”. It will break the gloomy atmosphere and brings the new clouds and other vapors in the sky. After the storm, the sky will be brighter and the air will be cleaner. The gloomy atmosphere will fall down along with the “black rain” and it will also burst with the vast sepulcher made of the vapors. Then, the sky will be another new sky with brighter light and cleaner air.

The summer dream of the blue Mediterranean is broken by the disturbing of the west wind. “All overgrown with azure moss and flowers/ so sweet, the sense faints picturing them!” But in the deep bottom of the ocean, the moss and flowers are growing so sweetly. When “the Spring” comes, the ocean may receive new waters pouring into him. With the mild east wind of spring, the beautiful picture will jump out of the Mediterranean's dream and become the true scenery.

Though the wild west wind is described by Shelley as a powerful, strong wild spirit which frightens all the creations, either on the earth, in the air or in the ocean, it still preserves the valuable parts and symbolizes hopes of the newborn things. Where the west wind passes, there will be no dead things left. It helps its sister to clean the natural environment in order to leave more space to the new lives. The dead leaves are replaced by new ones; and the season of spring will approach after the autumn and winter. In this poem, Shelley tells us a truth that everything changes from bad to good lives change from dead to newborn. The old, outmoded ones must be replaced by the new ones. This rule is not only suit for nature, it also suit for human society.

3. The Development in Human Society

In the poem Ode to the West Wind, Shelley also shows a kind of wish and hope for the future. Just like what we had said, in this poem, Shelley tells us that the society will change to be rational and hopeful. People should be the power, like the west wind, which destroy the bad old things and preserve the valued part to build beautiful future.

Shelley takes himself as the example to present the idea of the human development. In the fourth canto, Shelley describes his strong desire of being a part of the west wind. The west wind is a progressive power; people should follow this leading power to destroy the old, outworn thought and social systems in their mind and to preserve the progressive thoughts to fulfill their mind and build our rational society. As Shelley writes, “Lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!” which is also the aspiration of people: they want to be taken away from the cruel social reality. Everyone wants a peaceful life. But under such a social reality, there is no suitable way to develop human nature. The only way is to be taken by “the West Wind” and to be fallen “upon the thorns of life”, finally to die. Because death means to rebirth, human can be refreshed and face a new society.

In the last canto, Shelley hopes to combine with the west wind in order to develop new thought. “Be thou, Spirit fierce/My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!” is a good example to show his desire. “Drive my dead thoughts over the universe like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!” He hopes that people should pursue the newborn things to develop the world and themselves. The final sentence “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” is the most important sentence to illustrate the development concept. The new ideas must take the place of the traditional old thinking pattern. This sentence suggests that no matter how weak the newborn creations are, the spring will come anyway; no matter how strong the power of the old things is, the new things must come and become stronger one day. If there is a death, there must be something reborned. This is the eternal rule.

4. Conclusion

For Shelley, nature is a rich source of truth. Nature teaches us a lot of things. As in Ode to the West Wind, Shelley expresses his view that people should be confident for their future and be the revolutionary power fighting against the old, outworn things and social systems. People should follow the progressive social mainstream and help the newly rising things survive in the society. The seasons change, nature changes, so does our society. The old, bad and outworn things must be

replaced by the new progressive things. If winter comes, spring is not far behind!

References

- [1] Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*[M]. Shanghai: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2004.
- [2] Gu Zhengkun, *English Poetry*[M]. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2000.
- [3] Liu Bingshan, *A Short History of English Literature*[M]. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press, 1993.
- [4] M.H. Abram, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 5th edition, vol.2 [M]. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986.
- [5] Roland N. Stromberg, *An Intellectual History of Modern Europe* [M]. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2005
- [6] Wu Weiren, *History and Anthology of English Literature*, vol 2 [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1988.
- [7] Zhang Jian, Zhao Dong, Wang Wenlin, *Selected Reading in British and American Poetry* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2008.