

# ***Ode to the West Wind in the Light of Longinus'*** **Sublime Theory**

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## **Abstract**

*The present paper is an attempt to examine and evaluate "Ode to the West Wind" of Shelley in the light of Longinus's 'sublime theory'. The theory of 'sublime' propounded in the treatise **On the Sublime** by Longinus essentially deals with the idea of elevation or transcendence of the reader or hearer. The term 'sublime' simply means 'height' or 'elevation'. In the treatise Longinus opens out techniques and mechanisms that maximize elevation of the reader, for he thinks it as the most reliable and true characteristic of great art. The virtue of 'sublime' in a work of art lifts the reader to a higher plain out of himself/herself by circumscribing reasoning faculty and resultant suspension of judgment. It leaves strong and inefaceable impressions on the memory. The effects of 'sublime' are not availed by argumentation rather by revelation or illumination.*

**Keywords:** *sublime, longinus, SHELLEY, West Wind.*

Longinus in the chapter VIII of **On the Sublime** sets out five essential requisites of sublimity. The first two – "great thoughts", and "strong emotions"- are natural gifts; and the rest three are the artistic gifts – 'certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified arrangement'. As such Longinus sought to bring about a blending of natural and artistic sources of sublimity. The 'great thoughts' what Arnold in "The Study of Poetry" called 'truth and seriousness of substance and matter' (Enright & Chickera 269) stand first in the five-fold series of sublime-constituents because it is the echo of the great soul. Allen H. Gilbert writes, 'Excellence of style is the concomitant of a great soul'. (Blamires 16) Longinus writes: "It is not possible that men with mean and servile ideas and aims prevailing throughout their lives should produce anything that is admirable and worthy of immortality. Great accents we expect to fall from the lips of those whose thoughts are deep and grave. David Daiches writes: Great literature is that which excites and arouses the reader not only once but repeatedly; if it produces this impression after repeated readings and among men of different pursuits, lives, ambitions, ages, and languages then its greatness is beyond question. (Daiches 48)

The second natural source is 'strong emotions'. About it Longinus had promised to deal with in a separate book, which is not extant. Yet basing on hither-thither remarks, we can consolidate his ideas. According to him, great men having great thoughts are capable of deep and sincere feelings, which in the long run transcend or transport him. His stress on passion, ecstasy, imagination, transport, intensity and exaltation perhaps led Scott-James to designate him 'the first romantic critic'. (Scott-James 80) Longinus even goes to the extent of making distinction between true and false emotion like true and false sublime. Perhaps while making such distinction Aristotle was in his mind. According to him, some emotions such as fear, grief, and pity are incapable of attaining sublimity. T. S. Eliot too approves of emotions and feelings for poetic discourse provided they were depersonalized (Tradition and Individual Talent).

The third requisite is the appropriate use of figures. By adding strangeness to the ordinary speech (what Russian Formalists called 'defamiliarisation') causes a pleasant surprise and makes an immediate appeal to the emotions. Longinus selects six figures to bring about sublimity: A) Apostrophe- is the direct address to some person, thing or some abstract ideas; B) Asyndeton, when clauses are left loose by avoiding the use of conjunctions,

results in rapidity and evokes a sudden flow of feelings and emotions; C) Hyperbaton- is suggestive of unordered utterance made under emotional stress; D) Polysyndeton- is opposite to asyndeton, uses conjunctions in excess; E) Periphrasis (circumlocution) is a round about way of writing as it employs more words to convey few ideas. Longinus thinks it quite dangerous if it is not handled properly; F) Rhetorical Question, it does not require answer instead the answer is already implied.

The fourth constituent is 'noble diction'. The proper and striking use of words spontaneously bewitch readers quickly provided, diction is consistent with noble thoughts. Longinus writes: The proper time for using metaphors is when the passions roll like a torrent and sweep a multitude of them down their restless flood.

The last but not least constituent is the orderly placing of words, thoughts, emotions, figures and fluency into a harmonious whole. This stand immediately reminds me-like scholars of Roman poet and critic Horace and his **Ars Poetica** where the latter emphasizes the need and significance of craftsmanship and propriety in poetry. He recommended 'consistency and coherence in overall structure'. (Blamires 16)

"Ode to the West Wind" universally acknowledged as one of the rarest lyrics of English literature, was written in a wood that skirts the river Arno near Florence in 1819 on a day when the west wind was both mild and animating. More often than not Shelley turns to natural forces especially when he himself feels incapable, and implores it to help him so that he and his ideals could reach every nook and corners. In fact it is emotional outburst of his heart, and supreme achievement his rhetorical art. It has been the subject of much interpretation and reinterpretation. Outwardly it looks eulogizing the power of west wind. But on the deeper level it stands for inspiring spiritual power to Shelley that affects everything and moves all-round.

Shelley in the first section hails west wind and calls it 'wild' (for, it is past the control of humans) and 'autumn's being' (for, autumn cannot be felt in the absence of west wind as it blows hot in the season). The west wind being itself invisible drives away fell-off leaves as exorcists make evil spirits run away. Then Shelley compares 'yellow, and

black, and pale, and hectic red' (these various colors refer to decomposing leaves) to 'pestilence-stricken multitude'. Symbolically it reveals as leaves are decomposing on the ground so entire human society is degenerating or decomposing. Next, Shelley sees west wind as a chariot carrying seeds 'to their dark bed' where they remain dormant till the arrival of spring and the blow of Zephyr when the sky looks bright and blue. In the spring season Zephyr with its regenerating drives brings things into life again and consequently blesses sweet-flowers with lively colors and fragrances all around. As such Shelley calls west wind 'destroyer and preserver'. Finally, Shelley asks west wind to "hear, oh hear!"

In the second section, the poet examines west wind set in 'steep sky', where it moves along with all its force like a river floating above danger line. Due to storm and lightning, the sky looks agitated and clouds disintegrated. As it propels leaves to fall off, so clouds to scatter. These dispersed and ravaged clouds remind the poet of 'the bright hair uplifted from the heads of some maenads (worshippers of the Roman God of wine Bacchus are frenzied dancing women with streaming hair). These blown-clouds (tresses in the sense of maenads) refer to 'the approaching storm'; and are seen everywhere "from the dim verge/ Of the horizon to the zenith's height." The phrase 'zenith's height' reminds of Milton's grand style. The poet assumes howling sounds of the west wind the dirge or the funeral song prepared for the closing year. Towards the ending of the stanza, Shelley envisions that the closing night will form dome for a huge tomb in which the closing year will be buried. And the 'congregated might of vapours' will make roof over the grave. The atmosphere looks dense because of the thick layers of clouds. Hence the poet asks of the west wind "oh hear!"

In the third section the field of operation is sea- the Mediterranean and the Atlantic on the surface and the beneath both. The poet sees the Mediterranean as if it were dreaming of the ruins of 'old palaces and towns'. In autumn, the Mediterranean and the ancient Italian town of Baiae (it was once the playground of Roman emperors but due to volcanic disturbances, later on it was sunk) look calm and tranquil because no storm happens to disturb them. But with the onslaught of the west wind, the surface

of the Mediterranean and sleeping old palaces and towers look 'Quivering within the wave's intenser day./ All overgrown with azure moss and flower/ so sweet, the sense faints picturing them!....' This change may imply Shelley's hope for political change. The old towns and towers symbolize corrupt, degenerate rules and regimes, are worthy to be destroyed immediately. Next, Shelley pictures the surface of Atlantic sea being cut into thousands of deep passages as the west wind blows over it. As a result 'the sea blooms and the oozy woods' dispossess out of fear themselves of 'the sapless foliage' to hear the gust of the wind.

The fourth section in fact, is a brief recap of the theme of the first three sections and it seems as if it were written under emotional duress. Now wind is discussed in relation to the poet himself. The poet imagining himself 'a dead leaf', 'a swift cloud', and 'a wave' assures the west wind that he too was 'tameless, and swift, and proud' when he was in his younger days and then it never appeared scarce 'to outstrip thy skiey speed', and; would have never urged, in my sore need if I had had the energy of my boyhood days. In adulthood 'heavy weight of hours' rendered incapable and impotent. To see mankind being exploited and dehumanized by the corrupt systems and ideologies, the poet bursts out of agony and anguish-

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

In the final section, Shelley makes afresh request to the west wind and wishes to be an Aeolian lyre (this type of lyre sounds as the wind passes through it). As such the wind can supply harmony and life to him, as forest gets a humming hub with the blow of wind. It is not the matter of distress that he is undergoing the autumn. The magic of it will remove all notes of sadness replacing fresh vim and vigour and intimacy with the natural worlds. Hence the poet wishes west wind to be his spirit and make 'impetuous one'. As such he shall be able to scatter his dead ideals (because they are ineffective for now.) among the whole mankind, and that will serve like withered leaves to quicken a new birth! In short his ideals, which are ineffective, now will bring about a new era of universal brotherhood. Next he compares his ideals to 'ashes' of 'unextinguished hearth'. The poet wishes to scatter his

sparks of ideals only to cause a great fire. Having belief in changeability of nature, Shelley optimistically rounds off the poem with a prophecy:

If winter comes, can spring be far behind?

Obviously spring is not far behind winter. It is imminent. Everything happens in cyclic process. Joys and sorrows go alternatively.

If Milton had justified the ways of God to man in **Paradise Lost**, Shelley sought to justify the ways of love, fraternity, equality, patience and forgiveness to man and mankind in "Ode to the West Wind". Obviously it is great thought that takes birth not in ordinary souls. Great thoughts are the possessions of great souls (by 'great soul' I mean pure and sensitive soul). In the poem he is seen attempting to bring about the redemption of mankind eradicating all types of prevalent corruption and tyranny. Truly his poetic works conform to his poetic cult. As he wrote in the essay *The Defense of Poetry*- "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds." (Enright & Chickera 251)

Frankly saying, in the poem, the poet looks unhappy with the state-of-affairs. In the very first line – 'O wild West wind, thou breath of Autumn's being; the capitalized 'O' suggests to the outburst of emotion. And the frequent use of exclamation marks expounds the intensity of feelings and emotions. The vehemence of emotion reaches to its climax in the fourth section where he feels himself 'on the thorns of life and bleeding'. Yet his ardent belief in the imminent regeneration of mankind fills him with ecstasy or rapture-'If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' Though the poet is mostly in the poem sad, yet his hopeful vision of the future of mankind overcomes emotions of pathos. Longinus aadisapproves of some emotions like fear, grief, and pity. Hence reference to self- pity in the poem can be criticized.

"Ode to the West Wind" is replete with images and figures of speech. The poem starts off with 'apostrophe' and rounds off with 'rhetorical question'. These two figures make an immediate appeal to emotions.

In all five sections the poet doesn't forget his sublime vision of hale and hearty humanity. Selective and proper words have been used, no words are found extra. His careful handling of diction enhances the musicality of the

poem. The flow of the poem is nice and telling. Most probably, the poet used 'terza rima' stanzaic form to bring in consistency in thoughts, emotions, and figures of speech and as such to give impression of an organic whole.

On the whole, the poem involves all requisite elements to be sublime, nevertheless it cannot be claimed that the poem is devoid of defects. The defects of whatever kind can be ignored at least at cost of effects it yields. Finally I am intended to give it the status of sublime, as it carries away readers forcefully. Hence the poem is a fine specimen of sublimity. Moreover, I think,

Shelley is neither totally optimist, nor pessimist rather he is the first 'ameliorist' in Hardian term.

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