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Literary Review of Articles on Percy Shelley

Percy Bysshe Shelley was an influential Romantic writer during the early 19th century, having created many poems, including *An Ode to the West Wind* and *To a Skylark*, and works of political writing like *The Revolt of Islam* and *Queen Mab*. Being a politically active writer with controversial views on religion and monarchy, Shelley's views were reflected in both his creative poems and political pieces. A journal article by *The National Magazine* explains that despite Percy Shelley's controversial works attacking religion and government, he was an influential poet skilled in writing. Another article, "The Symbolism of the Wind and the Leaves in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'" by I. J. Kapstein in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* studies Shelley's use of imagery of leaves and wind, which justifies and argues for societal reform. This literary review will explore the content of both articles as *The National Magazine* discusses Shelley's accomplishments while Kapstein analyzes the symbolic use of imagery in Shelley's work.

In the *PMLA*, Kapstein promotes an interpretation of Shelley's *An Ode to the West Wind*, arguing that Shelley used the imagery of leaves and wind to justify societal reform. The *Ode* is a lyric that extensively discusses wind and its interaction with nature during autumn. After Shelley claims that the poem was written spontaneously during a trip to the woods, Kapstein is skeptical, writing "Shelley's statement of its immediate conception must be rejected if only because the poem is plainly something more than good description of a storm" (*PMLA* via JStor). Kapstein evidently refuses Shelley's report of the poem being composed spontaneously since more meaning lies in it, suggesting a thematic significance of the leaves and the wind. Kapstein proceeds to study the stanzas in detail: "In the fourth stanza the poet prays that he . . . may undergo the power of the wind in order to achieve his own regeneration, and . . . in the fifth stanza prays that . . . there will arise in the cycle of the seasons a regenerating influence upon mankind" (*PMLA* via JStor). Kapstein builds an interpretation of Shelley's use of the leaves and wind, broadening an initial connection between Shelley's ideas of the leaves' death and rebirth to changes in humans. "[I]n these six stanzas, as in 'Queen Mab,' the poet again attempted the writing of the 'Ode to the West Wind,' promising the birth of the new order of society from the ashes of the old" (*PMLA* via JStor). Kapstein now completely connects Shelley's use of imagery to rebirth in society

rather than simply in nature. Kapstein suggests that the return of plant life after the wind blows away the leaves argues for societal reform, as whatever turmoil may happen as a result of changes in the world is bound to return to a peaceful state of life. Whereas Kapstein's argument interprets a deeper significance in Shelley's poem, another article on the poet directly approaches Shelley's personal views.

In *The National Magazine*, an unidentified author draws attention to controversy in several of Shelley's works, arguing that they should not be excessively criticized, additionally emphasizing Shelley's accomplishments as a writer. Shelley's works featured controversial views such as the disbelief in religion and opposition to monarchy, which Shelley claimed led to negative effects such as war and hunger (Poetry Foundation). The article, however, notes that Shelley's supposed wrongdoing were should not be considered grave, instead being mere errors: "[T]hose errors did not spring from selfishness or malice, and we trust that we may be permitted . . . in embracing within the sphere of our charity even an erring brother, while we mourn over the lapse of him that erred" (*The National Magazine* via JStor). Acknowledging Shelley's errors yet deeming them unintentional allows the article to overcome an obstacle and proceed to praise Shelley, describing him as "Vigorous in imagination, harmonious in the structure of his verse, rich, even to magnificence, in wealth of language and impassioned description . . . his fine genius, profound scholarship and exquisite accomplishment" (*The National Magazine* via JStor). The article generously praises Shelley's accomplishments, building the reader's respect for the poet and depicting him as deserving of praise. Responding to Shelley's aforementioned controversies, the article explains "These opinions, procured for him hatred and calumny, not only from the coarse, the vain, and the malignant, but from those, whose reputation as gentlemen and scholars, might have taught them to regard the errors of a kindred genius with pity and regret, rather than with indignation" (*The National Magazine* via JStor). Now, the article explains that Shelley's work has been excessively criticized even by the respected and educated, who were expected to behave rationally and politely. By highlighting their violation of this expectation, the article's author argues for understanding and respectful criticism of Shelley. Overall, the article defends Shelley from rude criticism by excusing his controversial views and exalting his skill as a writer.

I. J. Kapstein analyzes Shelley's use of imagery to show the poet's message that disturbances in the world caused by change in society will stabilize just as plants regrow after winds blow them away in the fall. *The National Magazine* provides a view of Shelley's supposed errors in producing controversial works, and applauds his expertise in writing poems with elements such as imagination and language. While the articles focus on two different aspects of Shelley — his views and writing and a poet and the thematic message that he communicates, both agree that Shelley's views influenced his works. Just as the poet's opinions were directly reflected in his political pieces, they are

found on a deeper level in his poetic works. I. J. Kapstein's article in the *PMLA* proves its credibility by analyzing various poems and other works of Shelley as it focuses on the literary implementation of leaves and wind in his work. *The National Magazine's* article is a credible source as it offers a nuanced view of Shelley's works. Despite the author's belief that Shelley was wrong in spreading controversial ideas, he praises the poet while condemning others' harsh criticism of Shelley.