



Ode to the West Wind

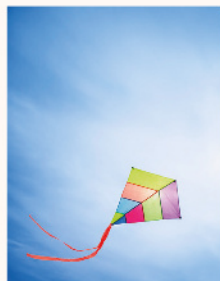
P.B. Shelley (1820)

In the following poem, Shelley describes the majesty and the regenerating power of the west wind and wishes to become one with it.

» Before you read

1. **CRITICAL THINKING** What ideas would you associate with wind? Are they mainly positive or negative? Look at at these images, then choose from among the following options or add your own.

- thrill fear freedom
 nervousness chaos joy
 change danger other:



I

O Wild West Wind, thou¹ breath of Autumn's being²,
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing³,
 Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red⁴,
 5 Pestilence-stricken⁵ multitudes: O thou,
 Who chariotest⁶ to their dark wintry bed
 The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until
 Thine⁷ azure sister of the Spring shall blow
 10 Her clarion⁸ o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
 (Driving sweet buds⁹ like flocks¹⁰ to feed in air)
 With living hues¹¹ and odours plain and hill:
 Wild Spirit, which art¹² moving everywhere;
 Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O hear!

II

15 Thou on whose stream, 'mid¹³ the steep sky's commotion¹⁴
 Loose¹⁵ clouds like Earth's decaying leaves are shed¹⁶
 Shook¹⁷ from the tangled boughs¹⁸ of Heaven and Ocean,
 Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread¹⁹
 On the blue surface of thine airy surge²⁰
 20 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head
 Of some fierce Maenad²¹, even from the dim verge²²
 Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
 The locks of the approaching storm. Thou Dirge²³
 Of the dying year, to which this closing night

1. thou = you
2. being: essenza
3. from ... fleeing: in fuga da un incantatore
4. hectic red: rosse di febbre
5. Pestilence-stricken: appestate
6. chariotest: trasporti
7. Thine = your
8. clarion: tromba
9. buds: boccioli
10. flocks: greggi
11. hues: tinte
12. art = are
13. 'mid = amid: in mezzo a
14. commotion: tumulto
15. Loose: sparse, in libertà
16. shed: disperse
17. Shook = shaken: agitate
18. tangled boughs: intricati rami
19. spread: sparsi
20. airy surge: mare d'aria
21. Maenad: Baccante (seguace del dio greco Dioniso)
22. dim verge: indistinto margine
23. Dirge: inno funebre

25 Will be the dome²⁴ of a vast sepulchre
Vaulted²⁵ with all thy congregated might²⁶
Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail²⁷ will burst: O hear!

III

Thou who didst waken²⁸ from his summer dreams
30 The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil²⁹ of his crystalline streams³⁰,
Beside a pumice³¹ isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day³²,
35 All overgrown³³ with azure moss³⁴ and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them³⁵! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers³⁶
Cleave themselves into chasms³⁷, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy³⁸ woods which wear
40 The sapless³⁹ foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow grey with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves⁴⁰: O hear!

IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift⁴¹ cloud to fly with thee;
45 A wave to pant⁴² beneath thy power, and share
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O Uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be
The comrade⁴³ of thy wanderings over Heaven,
50 As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed⁴⁴
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven⁴⁵
As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need⁴⁶.
Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!
55 A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee⁴⁷: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if⁴⁸ my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
60 Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone⁴⁹,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered⁵⁰ leaves to quicken a new birth⁵¹!
65 And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth⁵²
Ashes and sparks⁵³, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened⁵⁴ Earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
70 If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

- 24. **dome**: cupola
- 25. **Vaulted**: sovrastato
- 26. **congregated might**: potere radunato
- 27. **hail**: grandine
- 28. **didst waken = woke up**
- 29. **Lulled ... coil**: cullato dai flutti
- 30. **streams**: correnti
- 31. **pumice**: pomice
- 32. **Quivering ... day**: tremolanti nella luce resa più intensa dall'onda
- 33. **overgrown**: ricoperti
- 34. **moss**: muschio
- 35. **the sense ... them**: i sensi vengono meno a descriverli
- 36. **level powers**: calme superfici
- 37. **Cleave ... chasms**: si fendono in abissi
- 38. **oozy**: limacciosi
- 39. **sapless**: prive di linfa
- 40. **despoil themselves**: si spogliano
- 41. **swift**: rapida
- 42. **pant**: ansimare
- 43. **comrade**: compagno
- 44. **oustrip ... speed**: superare la tua velocità celeste
- 45. **striven**: lottato
- 46. **in my sore need**: nella mia disperazione
- 47. **thee = you**
- 48. **What if = I don't mind if**
- 49. **tone**: canto
- 50. **withered**: appassite
- 51. **quicken ... birth**: stimolare una rinascita
- 52. **unextinguished hearth**: focolare non spento
- 53. **Ashes and sparks**: ceneri e scintille
- 54. **unawakened**: dormiente

» Understanding the text

1. Which stanza do the following headings refer to? Write 1-5 next to each.

- a. The effects of the autumn wind on the sky.
- b. The poet's desire to become one with the wind.
- c. The effects of the west wind on the earth.
- d. The poet's desire to be carried away on and by the wind.
- e. The effects of the wind on the seas.

2. Focus on the first three stanzas. Complete the chart with some of the wind's effects on the three realms given below.

scatters clouds • subdues the Atlantic and its vegetation • sings a funeral song to the dying year • spreads seeds

Earth	Sky	Sea
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It sweeps away dead leaves. • It • • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It • It stirs up violent storms. • It • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the past, it shook the classical civilisations around the Mediterranean. • By contrast, now it •

3. Focus on the poet's wishes as expressed in the last two stanzas. Answer the questions, and justify your answers by referring to the text.

- a. What would he like to become in stanza four? Why?
- b. Who would he like to be again, and why?
- c. What qualities does he claim to share with the wind?
- d. What does he ask the wind to do in stanza five?

» Closer reading

4. Consider Shelley's language and answer the questions.

- a. The language of the ode has been defined as particularly sensuous. Why? Justify your answer by referring to the text.
- b. There is a personification that runs throughout the whole poem. Identify it.
- c. What semantic fields does Shelley's imagery draw upon?
 - religion
 - natural science
 - geometry
 - philosophy
 - mythology

5. The first and last stanzas are essential to understand the poet's message. Read them again and answer the questions.

- a. In stanza one, Shelley contrasts Autumn with Spring. What images are associated with each season? What does this contrast mean?
- b. The image of the dead leaves comes back towards the end of the poem. Where? What are they associated with this time?
- c. In line 14, Shelley defines the west wind as a "Destroyer and Preserver". What is the meaning of this paradox?
- d. The image of Spring returns in stanza five (l. 70). What 'spring' may Shelley have in mind for society and humankind?
- e. Look at the simile contained in lines 66-67. What role does it imply for poetry and poets?
- f. What is Shelley's west wind thus a symbol of?
 - It is a symbol of the sterility of the poet's times.
 - It is a symbol of the poet's thirst for freedom.
 - It is a symbol of change and never-ending renewal.

» Rounding it up

6. **FIRST** Complete the following analysis with the words provided.

personifications • human • wish • suffering • epithets • figurative • disseminated • double • imagery • regenerate

In his best-known ode, Shelley addresses the west wind as if it were [1] and describes its effects on earth, sky and sea. The [2] of the first three stanzas is typically Romantic, thanks to its sensuous and [3] language and Shelley's use of metaphors, similes and [4] of natural elements. The poet addresses the wind using a series of [5], the most important of which is "Destroyer and Preserver", hinting at its [6] nature in the cycles of death and rebirth of the natural world. In the last two stanzas the ode focuses on the poet's present state of [7] and on his [8] to identify with this powerful element: in this way, his thoughts and words will be [9] in the world so as to wake society from its torpor and [10] hope among mankind.

» Over to you: DIGITAL COMPETENCE

7. **PROJECT** The theme of wind as a symbol of renewal and rebirth has informed a famous rock ballad entitled *Wind of Change*, written by the German metal band Scorpions in 1989. Search the net to find the lyrics and the video and prepare a short presentation about it. Make sure you explain what kind of changes the song was inspired by, and include all the references to political events that you can find in both the video and the text.