

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

1792-1822

■ Biography

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 into a wealthy aristocratic family. He was educated at the prestigious Eton College and at Oxford University, but soon rebelled against his conventional upbringing. In the same year, he eloped with the young Harriet Westbrook, causing a permanent estrangement from his family.

For the next three years, the couple lived a nomadic existence, while Shelley supported a variety of causes in his numerous radical writings.

In 1814 the poet moved to London, where he met the anarchist philosopher William Godwin and fell in love with his 16-year-old daughter Mary. Shelley left England to go abroad with her and travelled around Europe. In 1815 they spent some time on Lake Geneva with Lord Byron, but when Harriet drowned herself in 1816 Shelley and Mary returned to England to get legally married.

The couple moved to Italy in 1818, living first in Lucca, Este and Venice before settling permanently in Tuscany. Here the poet experienced an extraordinary burst of creative energy between 1819 and 1820. He wrote some of his best and most famous lyrics, including *Ode to the West Wind*, *Ozymandias* and *To a Skylark*, and completed his verse drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).

In 1822, shortly after moving to an isolated beach house in Lerici, Shelley died in a boating accident in the bay of La Spezia. He was only 29.

Ode to the West Wind

Themes *Ode to the West Wind*, considered by many as Shelley's greatest short poem, was written in 1819 and published the following year. As the poet himself explained in a note appended to the original text, it was conceived and mainly written in a wood beside the river Arno near Florence on a windy day in late summer, when the tempestuous force of the elements brought to his mind the **perpetual cycles of death and rebirth** in the natural world. The ideological framework of the poem is precisely the **need for renewal** in a corrupted and unjust world, for a **political, social and moral regeneration** of which Shelley's 'west wind' symbolically becomes the messenger and the instrument at the same time. In the ode, the wind is described as the essence of seasonal change affecting the natural world in all its realms, and as an **invisible and intangible force** beyond human control

with which the poet identifies himself as he attempts to spread his reforming message among people.

Style and structure Although the structure of the poem apparently conforms to a traditional ode, Shelley **reinvented its form** by borrowing features from Elizabethan poetry and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Each of the five stanzas of the ode takes the form of an **independent sonnet** (it contains 14 lines ending with a rhyming couplet), but the use of a 'terza rima' verse form (i.e., tercets with an interlaced rhyme scheme) conveys unity and continuity throughout the poem. The **highly figurative language** used by Shelley juxtaposes images of life and death to show the regenerating function of the wind, while his **exploitation of musical patterns** through run-on-lines and assonances tries to express its ultimate elusiveness.

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.

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
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

- | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. thou = you | 11. hues: tinte | greco Dioniso) |
| 2. being: essenza | 12. art = are | 22. dim verge: indistinto margine |
| 3. from ... fleeing: in fuga da un incantatore | 13. 'mid = amid: in mezzo a | 23. Dirge: inno funebre |
| 4. hectic red: rosse di febbre | 14. commotion: tumulto | 24. dome: cupola |
| 5. Pestilence-stricken: appestate | 15. Loose: sparse, in libertà | 25. Vaulted: sovrastato |
| 6. chariotest: trasporti | 16. shed: disperse | 26. congregated might: potere radunato |
| 7. Thine = your | 17. Shook = shaken: agitate | 27. hail: grandine |
| 8. clarion: tromba | 18. tangled boughs: intricati rami | 28. didst waken = woke up |
| 9. buds: boccioli | 19. spread: sparsi | 29. Lulled ... coil: cullato dai flutti |
| 10. flocks: greggi | 20. airy surge: mare d'aria | 30. streams: correnti |
| | 21. Maenad: Baccante [seguace del dio | 31. pumice: pomice |

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?

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 superficiali

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

- Which stanza do the following headings refer to? Write 1-5 next to each.
 - The effects of the autumn wind on the sky.
 - The poet's desire to become one with the wind.
 - The effects of the west wind on the earth.
 - The poet's desire to be carried away on and by the wind.
 - The effects of the wind on the seas.
- 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

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

Rounding it up

- 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.