

# Ode to the West Wind Study Guide

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## Summary

In the powerful and frequently quoted “Ode to the West Wind,” Percy Bysshe Shelley employs a poetic structure of five cantos with four tercets each (a tercet is three lines of verse). The third line of each tercet allows for change in the direction of the poet’s thought. The end of each canto features a rhyming couplet that allows the passionate urgency of the poet’s words to gain strength as his persona strives to merge his essence with that of the driving West Wind. Shelley’s wild, proud, untamed wind forms his personal emblem, the perfect symbol for and the impetuous agent of radical social change.

Shelley, a poet of the second generation of English Romantics, wrote his ode shortly after the Peterloo Massacre, in which royal soldiers attacked and killed working people at a protest rally in the St. Peter’s Field area of Manchester. The poem also followed shortly after some of Shelley’s own most terrible personal losses. Together with other works written in 1819, such as “Sonnet: England in 1819” and “Song to the Men of England,” “Ode to the West Wind” did much to shore up Shelley’s reputation as radical thinker.

The first of five cantos of the ode summon the West Wind, referring to it as a kind of magician, a transformer in and of the world emanating from autumn itself, an invisible enchanter from whom ghostly dead leaves scurry. The first canto makes grief-spawned allusions to the deaths of the poet’s son William and of others close to him, as well as his knowledge of and sympathy for England’s poor: Shelley speaks of autumn leaves as “pestilence-stricken multitudes” that the great wind blows to their “dark wintry bed” (graves). He finds intermixed with those driven leaves, however, the “winged seeds” that, as stanza 3 has it, will soon be awakened from a death-like sleep by the West Wind’s “azure sister of the Spring.” This wind from the warm south will open the buds whose flowers feed on the sweet springtime air as a flock of sheep feeds on pasture grass.

In the couplet ending canto 1, the poet’s persona calls out to praise the wildness of the West Wind and call it “Destroyer and preserver.” He sees it as the force that must listen to his cry for the transformation of society, a cry he made more directly in poems such as “Sonnet: England in 1819.” In “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley oxymoronicly portrays the wind as something that at once “preserves” the world from destruction and destroys the existing order that is waging war against humanity.

Canto 2 begins with a continuation of the speaker’s sense of awe concerning the wind’s might; he hails the wind as the clouds’ creator—a “living stream” in the sky that moves the “trees” of heaven and ocean. In stanza 2, the poet delineates a vision of angels that flow with the wind and that, in his simile, are like the “bright hair” streaming “from the head of some fierce Maenad.” Inducing in his readers a sense of vertigo, Shelley takes them to the height of the skies and to the distant horizon, where they see “the locks of the approaching storm,” a storm that will bring about changes on the earth.

At the end of canto 1, stanza 4, and at the beginning of the ending rhyming couplet, the term “dirge” is Shelley’s descriptor of the stormy wind signaling the old year’s demise. This melancholy wind will in turn create “the dome of a vast sepulcher” that will have as its ceiling vaulting a host of vapors from whose seeming solidity a rain of darkness and hail will explode as—once again—a pleading voice cries for people to heed what is foretold: “O hear!” With this cry, Shelley the prophet announces the end of an old, dehumanizing order and the beginning of a new order that will offer freedom to the oppressed.

In canto 3, the poet’s persona furthers the notion of things changing instantly from sweetness to darkness and cold through the action of his ever-driving West Wind. He asks readers to envision a Mediterranean Sea suddenly being awakened from deep summer sleep “Beneath a pumice isle in Baiae’s Bay,” a place “All overgrown with azure moss, and flowers/ So sweet, the sense faints picturing them!” Below the sea wrack floating in great ocean depths, the realization occurs that profound change is happening in the world, and the sea’s denizens “tremble and despoil themselves” out of panic. Something is indeed afoot in Europe, and it does not simply have to do with a change in weather: The palpable fear expressed by the powers of the ocean, one is led to believe, is the fear felt by earth’s great and mighty, who will out of fear “grow gray” when catastrophic change finally comes.

Beginning with canto 4, the poet shifts into a more personal voice. Shelley praises, contrasts himself with, and longs like a leaf to be wafted by his beloved West Wind. His yearnings for oneness with this spirit of nature have the intensity of heartfelt prayer. The poet would choose to be a dead leaf blown about by the wind, or a flying cloud, or a wave on the sea being pushed to shore rather than stay in his present despairing condition. Hoping to share in the West Wind’s power in order to be freed from the bonds of earth, he calls upon the “uncontrollable” to control him, to be for him a strong friend who would lead him just as an older, stronger adult would mentor a child, saying, “if even/ I were as in my boyhood, and could be/ The comrade of thy wanderings over heaven.”

The fourth line in the fourth stanza is another prayer to the wind, and this time Shelley asks it to “lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud” because, as he exclaims in one of the most memorable phrases of the poem, “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” The speaker feels weighed down by time and life’s circumstances, and he suffers unmercifully. He cries out for the release that his reigning West Wind can provide.

Canto 5 ends “Ode to the West Wind” with the persona’s most passionate pleas, then features his commands to the invisible mover and shaker of the world. In the first stanza, he petitions the wind to be its lyre, asking that, if his own leaves are falling as those in Nature, the wind should use them to help create a melancholy tone befitting the autumn season. Then he asks the wind for the ultimate favor—to be one with it: “Be thou, Spirit fierce,/ My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!” He compares his thoughts to those dead leaves the wind blows, asking that those thoughts, like leaves, be whirled through the world to “quicken a new birth.”

Finally, when the poet’s persona prays for the wind to “Scatter, as from an unextinguish’d hearth/ Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!” he makes clear that he now sees himself as the wind’s agent, doing its bidding by prophesying through his written words. The prediction he makes is subtle and—on the surface—even pedestrian, with its commonsensical observation, “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” The question becomes a profound one, however, if winter is equated with an England hobbled by the darkness and cold of greed, tyranny, and scorn for the poor and if spring stands for the happy birth of an England of noble aspiration—as was Shelley’s intent.

## Summary

In “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley defies the remote, impersonal character of the unseen Power behind Nature and strives to establish a personal relationship with it. The poem manages to reconcile the poet’s

terrific emotional intensity with the elegant, even stately formal pattern of the regular Horatian ode. Using heroic meter (iambic pentameter) throughout, Shelley made each of the five stanzas into a sonnet with four terza-rima tercets and a closing couplet. The poetical effect is rather unlike that of the usual sonnet. Shelley's interlocking rhymes sweep a reader along like gusts of wind, and the couplet pounds its message home with direct clarity and force.

The first three stanzas, addressed to the wild west wind, praise its irresistible power, marking its effects on all things in nature: clouds in the air, waves on the sea, leaves in the forest, even "the oozy woods which wear the sapless foliage of the ocean." Poets usually address the mild, warm winds of Spring that bring nature to life, but Shelley confronts the cold, wild "breath of Autumn's being," which acts as both destroyer and preserver. The hidden Power behind Nature is not always friendly to humankind. The morality or immorality of its operations may not be discernible. Thus, the poet stands, appropriately, in awe of it. Each of the first three stanzas ends with a plea for the wind to take heed and hear the poet's prayer.

The fourth stanza turns introspective. The poet wonders whether he might be used as the leaves have been, tossed about and left for dead by the indifferent force. He humbles himself, admitting that his powers have faded since boyhood, when

I would ne'er have striven  
As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a  
cloud!  
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!  
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
One too like thee:  
tameless, and swift, and proud.

Then in the final stanza the poet casts off the humility with the simile and claims a more intimate, metaphoric, mythic relationship with the wild Spirit. "Make me thy lyre," he demands, first to accompany the Power and turn the wind into sweet music, and then boldly to become it, "Be thou me." The poet has found that "soul out of my soul." He yokes the great hidden Power to his own imagination to scatter among humankind the glowing spark of his verse "to quicken a new birth." Thus, the Shelleyan poet becomes the prophet of an apocalyptic revolution to redeem humankind from torpid experience.

Then, suddenly, after such thunderous bursts of emotion, the poem ends as quietly as a sigh with perhaps the finest, most wistful and haunting line in all English poetry, a question: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

## Themes: Themes and Meanings

In "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley examines and compares two phenomena that are particularly potent: the power of nature and the power of poetry. Like most Romantic poets, he sees a clear link between these two, believing that the poet's power arises from nature, inspired by it and akin to it in many respects. Many similes in this poem, and in others by Shelley, focus readers' attention on the comparisons. Donald Reiman has described the themes of this poem as "the Poet's personal despair and his hopes for social renewal" expressed "in images drawn from the seasonal cycle" (*Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1969). Hence, the destructive power of the West Wind parallels Shelley's fear that the beauty of the natural world, and metaphorically the beauty of his own works, is doomed to oblivion by a hostile and insensitive force. At the same time, however, he recognizes that the destructive power of the West Wind is but a part of a larger cycle in which what seems like death is merely a necessary stage in the process of regeneration that perpetuates life itself. In the final stanzas of the poem he offers some hope that, despite his being constricted by his humanity and possibly being ignored by those whom he wishes to enlighten, he may one day be able to speak to others. Like the new life that comes inevitably every spring, his works may be "reborn" when people (perhaps those other than his contemporaries) discover them and listen to Shelley's calls for social and moral reform.

The specifics of Shelley's plan for reforming the world do not appear in "Ode to the West Wind." Rather, this poem focuses on the process by which his other works may one day achieve their purpose in the world. Those familiar with classical or Renaissance poetry may notice a similarity between this poem and those by Horace or by Ben Jonson, whose "Go, Little Book" verses appeal in a similar way for the continued life of their poetry. Like those poets who preceded him, Shelley hopes that his work will one day be read and appreciated by an audience that can understand his deep concern for the improvement of humankind, one that will be willing to listen to his plan for bringing about such improvement.

## Analysis: The Poem

Like many of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poems, "Ode to the West Wind" was inspired by a natural phenomenon, an autumn storm that prompted the poet to contemplate the links between the outer world of nature and the realm of the intellect. In five stanzas directly addressed to the powerful wind that Shelley paradoxically calls both "destroyer" and "preserver" (line 14), the poet explores the impact of the regenerative process that he sees occurring in the world around him and compares it to the impact of his own poetry, which he believes can have similar influence in regenerating mankind.

In each stanza, Shelley speaks to the West Wind as if it is an animate power. The first three stanzas form a logical unit; in them the poet looks at how the wind influences the natural terrain over which it moves. The opening lines describe the way the wind sweeps away the autumn leaves and carries off seeds of vegetation, which will lie dormant through winter until the spring comes to give them new life as plants. In the second stanza, the poet describes the clouds that whisk across the autumn sky, driven by the same fierce wind and twisted into shapes that remind him of Maenads, Greek maidens known for their wild behavior. Shelley calls the wind the harbinger of the dying year, a visible sign that a cycle of nature's life is coming to a close. The poet uses the third stanza to describe the impact of the wind on the Mediterranean coast line and the Atlantic ocean; the wind, Shelley says, moves the waters and the undersea vegetation in much the same way it shifts the landscape.

In the final two stanzas, the speaker muses about the possibilities that his transformation by the wind would have on his ability as a poet. If he could be a leaf, a cloud, or a wave, he would be able to participate directly in the regenerative process he sees taking place in the natural world. His words—that is, his poetry—would become like these natural objects, which are scattered about the world and which serve as elements to help bring about new life. He wishes that, much like the seeds he has seen scattered about, his "leaves" (line 58), his "dead thoughts" (line 63)—his poems—could be carried across the world by the West Wind so that they could "quicken to a new birth" (line 64) at a later time, when others might take heed of their message. The final question with which the poet ends this poem is actually a note of hope: The "death" that occurs in winter is habitually followed by a "new life" every spring. The cycle of the seasons that he sees occurring around him gives Shelley hope that his works might share the fate of other objects in nature; they may be unheeded for a time, but one day they will have great impact on humankind.

## Analysis: Forms and Devices

The structure of "Ode to the West Wind" is exceptionally complex. Each of the five stanzas is itself a terza rima sonnet, consisting of fourteen lines divided into four triplets and a concluding couplet. Through the complex, interlocking rhyme scheme of terza rima, Shelley gives the poem a strong sense of rhythm. The form also gives emphasis to the concluding couplet in each stanza, thereby focusing the reader's attention on the final line or lines. The effect Shelley achieves is important, for he wishes to emphasize, in the first three stanzas, the speaker's plea that the West Wind heed his call, and in the final stanza he wants to highlight the significant rhetorical question with which the poem ends.

The primary literary trope in the poem is personification. Shelley repeatedly addresses the West Wind as if it were an animate, intelligent being; one might be reminded of the way elements of nature are represented in classical Greek or Latin literature, or in American Indian writings. Shelley wants readers to consider the Wind a living force that helps shape the landscape—literally, the physical landscape, and metaphorically, the landscape of human minds and attitudes.

Shelley uses three major images of the poem—the wave, the leaf, and the cloud—to demonstrate the ways in which the West Wind treats elements of the physical landscape. The poet’s scene-painting is especially noteworthy; in a few short lines in each of the first three stanzas he depicts the effects of the fierce autumn wind on the ocean, the earth, and the sky. In the fourth stanza, he applies these descriptions to himself, calling on the West Wind to work its magic on him in the same way it has on the natural world, so he too will “die” only to rise again and give life—intellectual life.

One of the most striking images in the poem is used in the fourth stanza to describe the poet’s present plight: “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” (line 54) he cries out to the West Wind. In that single line, following his plea that he be made like the wave, the leaf, or the cloud so he can be transformed by the powers of the wind, Shelley expresses the problem of the Romantic poet: He would soar to new heights of understanding and deliver insight into life to all humanity if he could, but his human nature keeps him affixed to the earth, with all its troubles and stumbling blocks. Life itself is seen as a painful rosebush whose thorns afflict one who wishes to rise above the day-to-day humdrum of human existence. Shelley realizes that he cannot do so. Nevertheless, he has hopes that his works may be like those natural objects that seem to die in winter only to rise to new life in spring. He compares his verse to “ashes and sparks” from an unextinguished fire (line 67), which he hopes the wind will scatter so they may flare up in other places, thereby widening his impact on others.

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## Quotes: "If Winter Comes, Can Spring Be Far Behind?"

Context: This vivid lyric poem reveals Shelley's ability to paint colorful and exciting pictures of nature. He addresses the "wild West Wind," the "breath of Autumn's being," and then describes the wind-driven autumn leaves and seeds, "pestilence-stricken multitudes." "Hear, oh, hear!" the poet begs the "Wild Spirit" of the wind, the "dirge/ Of the dying year." Then the poet describes the clouds of a storm being driven forward by the West Wind. Now he reveals the reason for his admiration of the West Wind. He is in "sore need," for his wildly romantic poetic powers have weakened, and he needs some inspiration to lift him above the dull, everyday world: "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" he screams. He wishes he were a "dead leaf," a "swift cloud," or a wave, so that he could be lifted by the wind. He remembers his lost boyhood, when he wildly believed himself able to "outstrip [the wind's] skyey speed." Time has "chained and bowed" the poet, who was "tameless, and swift, and proud" like the wind. He begs the wind to make him its lyre, to become his spirit, and he sees a glimmer of hope:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,  
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks,  
my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawakened earth  
The trumpet of a prophecy!  
O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?