

# Ode to the West Wind

BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

## I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!

## II

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,  
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,  
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread  
On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,  
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge  
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,  
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night  
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,  
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere  
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear!

### III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams  
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,  
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,  
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers  
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers  
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou  
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below  
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear  
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,  
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!

### IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;  
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;  
A wave to pant 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 comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,  
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed  
Scarce seem'd a vision; 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 chain'd and bow'd  
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!  
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,  
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

## Percy Shelley: Poems Summary and Analysis of "Ode to the West Wind"

A first-person persona addresses the west wind in five stanzas. It is strong and fearsome. In the first stanza, the wind blows the leaves of autumn. In the second stanza, the wind blows the clouds in the sky. In the third stanza, the wind blows across an island and the waves of the sea. In the fourth stanza, the persona imagines being the leaf, cloud, or wave, sharing in the wind's strength. He desires to be lifted up rather than caught low on "the thorns of life," for he sees himself as like the wind: "tameless, and swift, and proud." In the final stanza, he asks the wind to play upon him like a lyre; he wants to share the wind's fierce spirit. In turn, he would have the power to spread his verse throughout the world, reawakening it.

### Analysis

The poet is directing his speech to the wind and all that it has the power to do as it takes charge of the rest of nature and blows across the earth and through the seasons, able both to preserve and to destroy all in its path. The wind takes control over clouds, seas, weather, and

more. The poet offers that the wind over the Mediterranean Sea was an inspiration for the poem. Recognizing its power, the wind becomes a metaphor for nature's awe-inspiring spirit. By the final stanza, the speaker has come to terms with the wind's power over him, and he requests inspiration and subjectivity. He looks to nature's power to assist him in his work of poetry and prays that the wind will deliver his words across the land and through time as it does with all other objects in nature.

The form of the poem is consistent in pattern. Each stanza is fourteen lines in length, using the rhyming pattern of aba bcb cdc ded ee. This is called terza rima, the form used by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*.

Keeping in mind that this is an ode, a choral celebration, the tone of the speaker understandably includes excitement, pleasure, joy, and hope. Shelley draws a parallel between the seasonal cycles of the wind and that of his ever-changing spirit. Here, nature, in the form of the wind, is presented, according to Abrams "as the outer correspondent to an inner change from apathy to spiritual vitality, and from imaginative sterility to a burst of creative power."

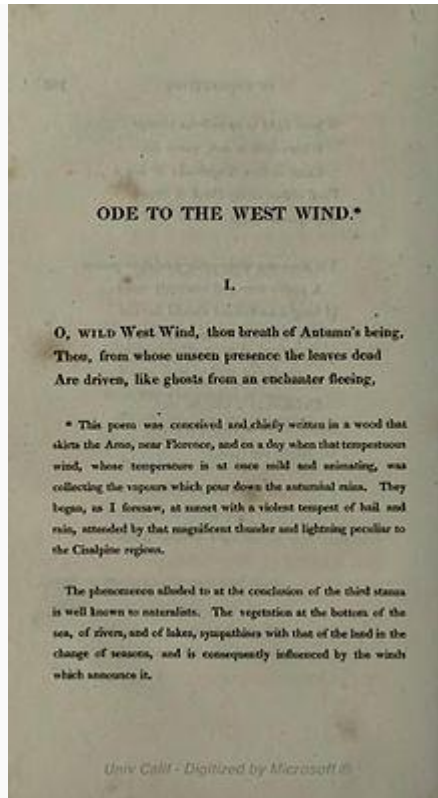
Thematically, then, this poem is about the inspiration Shelley draws from nature. The "breath of autumn being" is Shelley's atheistic version of the Christian Holy Spirit. Instead of relying on traditional religion, Shelley focuses his praise around the wind's role in the various cycles in nature—death, regeneration, "preservation," and "destruction." The speaker begins by praising the wind, using anthropomorphic techniques (wintry bed, chariots, corpses, and clarions) to personalize the great natural spirit in hopes that it will somehow heed his plea. The speaker is aware of his own mortality and the immortality of his subject. This drives him to beg that he too can be inspired ("make me thy lyre") and carried ("be through my lips to unawakened earth") through land and time.

The first two stanzas are mere praise for the wind's power, covered in simile and allusion to all that which the wind has the power to do: "loosen," "spread," "shed," and "burst." In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the speaker enters into the poem, seeking (hoping) for equal treatment along with all other objects in nature, at least on the productive side. The poet offers humility in the hope that the wind will assist him in achieving his quest to "drive [his] dead thoughts over the universe." Ultimately, the poet is thankful for the inspiration he is able to draw from nature's spirit, and he hopes that it will also be the same spirit that carries his words across the land where he also can be a source of inspiration.

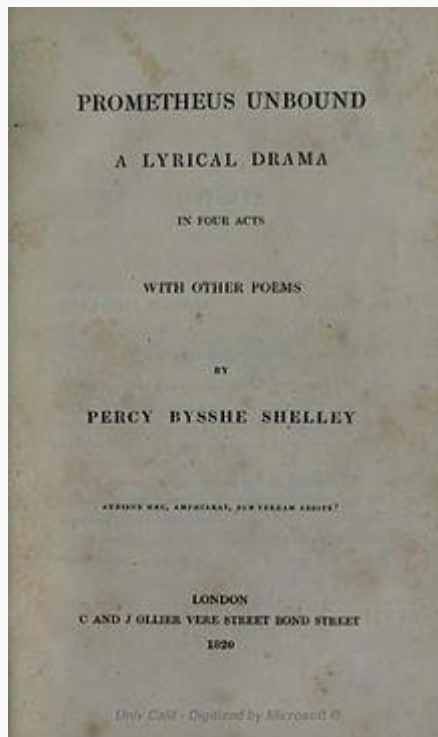
## Ode to the West Wind

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From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



1820 publication in the collection *Prometheus Unbound with Other Poems*.



1820 cover of *Prometheus Unbound*, C. and J. Collier, London.

"Ode to the West Wind" is an [ode](#), written by [Percy Bysshe Shelley](#) in 1819 near [Florence](#), Italy. It was [published](#) in 1820 by [Charles and James Ollier](#) in London as part of the collection [Prometheus Unbound](#), *A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts, With Other Poems*. Some have

interpreted the poem as the speaker lamenting his inability to directly help those in England owing to his being in Italy. At the same time, the poem expresses the hope that its words will inspire and influence those who read or hear it.<sup>[1]</sup> Perhaps more than anything else, Shelley wanted his message of reform and revolution spread, and the wind becomes the [trope](#) for spreading the word of change through the poet-prophet figure. Some also believe that the poem is due to the loss of his son, William (born to [Mary Shelley](#)) in 1819. His son Charles (to Harriet Shelley) died in 1826, after "Ode to the West Wind" was written and published. The ensuing pain influenced Shelley. The poem allegorises the role of the poet as the voice of change and revolution. At the time of composing this poem, Shelley without doubt had the [Peterloo Massacre](#) of August 1819 in mind. His other poems written at the same time—[The Masque of Anarchy](#), [Prometheus Unbound](#), and "[England in 1819](#)"—take up these same problems of political change, revolution, and role of the poet.<sup>[2]</sup>

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## Structure[\[edit\]](#)



Percy Bysshe Shelley's fair draft of lines 1–42, 1819, Bodleian Library.

The poem "Ode to the West Wind" consists of five sections written in [terza rima](#). Each section consists of four tercets (ABA, BCB, CDC, DED) and a rhyming couplet (EE). The Ode is written in [iambic pentameter](#).

The poem begins with three sections describing the wind's effects upon earth, air, and ocean. The last two sections are Shelley speaking directly to the wind, asking for its power, to lift him like a leaf, a cloud or a wave and make him its companion in its wanderings. He asks the wind to take his thoughts and spread them all over the world so that the youth are awoken with his ideas. The poem ends with an optimistic note which is that if winter days are here then spring is not very far.

## Interpretation of the poem [\[edit\]](#)

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The poem "Ode to the West Wind" can be divided in two parts: the first three cantos are about the qualities of the Wind and each ends with the invocation "Oh hear!". The last two cantos give a relation between the Wind and the speaker.

### First Canto [\[edit\]](#)

The first stanza begins with the [alliteration](#) "wild West Wind" (line 1). The form of the apostrophe makes the wind also a [personification](#). However, one must not think of this ode as an optimistic praise of the wind; it is clearly associated with autumn. The first few lines contain sinister elements, such as "leaves dead" (2), the aspect of death being highlighted by the inversion which puts "dead" (2) at the end of the line. These leaves haunt as "ghosts" (3) that flee from something that panics them.

"chariotest" (6) is the second person singular. The "corpse within its grave" (8) in the next line is in contrast to the "azure sister of the Spring" (9)—a reference to the east wind—whose "living hues and odours" (12) evoke a strong contrast to the colours of the fourth line of the poem that evoke death. In the last line of this canto the west wind is considered the "Destroyer" (14) because it drives the last signs of life from the trees, and the "Preserver" (14) for scattering the seeds which will come to life in the spring.

### Second Canto [\[edit\]](#)

The second canto of the poem is much more fluid than the first one. The sky's "clouds" (16) are "like earth's decaying leaves" (16). They are a reference to the second line of the first canto ("leaves dead", 2). They also are numerous in number like the dead leaves. Through this reference the landscape is recalled again. The "clouds" (16) are "Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean" (17). This probably refers to the fact that the line between the sky and the stormy sea is indistinguishable and the whole space from the horizon to the zenith is covered with trailing storm clouds. The "clouds" can also be seen as "Angels of rain" (18). In a biblical way, they may be messengers that bring a message from heaven down to earth through rain and lightning. These two natural phenomena with their "fertilizing and illuminating power" bring a change.

Line 21 begins with "Of some fierce Maenad" and again the west wind is part of the second canto of the poem; here he is two things at once: first he is "dirge/Of the dying year" (23–24) and second he is "a prophet of tumult whose prediction is decisive"; a prophet who does not only bring "black rain, and fire, and hail" (28), but who "will burst" (28) it. The "locks of the approaching storm" (23) are the messengers of this bursting: the "clouds".

Shelley also mentions that when the West Wind blows, it seems to be singing a funeral song about the year coming to an end and that the sky covered with a dome of clouds looks like a "sepulchre", i.e., a burial chamber or grave for the dying year or the year which is coming to an end.

Shelley in this canto "expands his vision from the earthly scene with the leaves before him to take in the vaster commotion of the skies". This means that the wind is now no longer at the horizon and therefore far away, but he is exactly above us. The clouds now reflect the image of the swirling leaves; this is a parallelism that gives evidence that we lifted "our attention from the finite world into the macrocosm". The "clouds" can also be compared with the leaves; but the clouds are more unstable and bigger than the leaves and they can be seen as messengers of rain and lightning as it was mentioned above.

### Third Canto [\[edit\]](#)

This refers to the effect of west wind in the water. The question that comes up when reading the third canto at first is what the subject of the verb "saw" (33) could be. On the one hand there is the "blue Mediterranean" (30). With the "Mediterranean" as subject of the canto, the "syntactical movement" is continued and there is no break in the fluency of the poem; it is said that "he lay, / Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams, / Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay, / And saw in

sleep old palaces and towers" (30–33). On the other hand it is also possible that the lines of this canto refer to the "wind" again. Then the verb that belongs to the "wind" as subject is not "lay", but the previous line of this canto, that says "Thou who didst waken . . . And saw" (29, 33). But whoever—the "Mediterranean" or the "wind"—"saw" (33) the question remains whether the city one of them saw, is real and therefore a reflection on the water of a city that really exists on the coast; or the city is just an illusion. Pirie is not sure of that either. He says that it might be "a creative you interpretation of the billowing seaweed; or of the glimmering sky reflected on the heaving surface". Both possibilities seem to be logical. To explain the appearance of an underwater world, it might be easier to explain it by something that is realistic; and that might be that the wind is able to produce illusions on the water. With its pressure, the wind "would waken the appearance of a city". From what is known of the "wind" from the last two cantos, it became clear that the wind is something that plays the role of a Creator. Whether the wind creates real things or illusions does not seem to be that important. [Baiae's bay](#) (at the northern end of the [Gulf of Naples](#)) actually contains visible Roman ruins underwater (that have been shifted due to earthquakes.) Obviously the moss and flowers are seaweed. It appears as if the third canto shows—in comparison with the previous cantos—a turning-point. Whereas Shelley had accepted death and changes in life in the first and second canto, he now turns to "wistful reminiscence [, recalls] an alternative possibility of transcendence". From line 26 to line 36 he gives an image of nature. But if we look closer at line 36, we realise that the sentence is not what it appears to be at first sight, because it obviously means, so sweet that one feels faint in describing them. This shows that the idyllic picture is not what it seems to be and that the harmony will certainly soon be destroyed. A few lines later, Shelley suddenly talks about "fear" (41). This again shows the influence of the west wind which announces the change of the season.

#### Fourth Canto [\[edit\]](#)

Whereas the cantos one to three began with "O wild West Wind" and "Thou" (15, 29) and were clearly directed to the wind, there is a change in the fourth canto. The focus is no more on the "wind", but on the speaker who says "If I . . ." (43–44). Until this part, the poem has appeared very anonymous and was only concentrated on the wind and its forces so that the author of the poem was more or less forgotten. Pirie calls this "the suppression of personality" which finally vanishes at that part of the poem. It becomes more and more clear that what the author talks about now is himself. That this must be true, shows the frequency of the author's use of the first-person pronouns "I" (43–44, 48, 51, 54), "my" (48, 52), and "me" (53). These pronouns appear nine times in the fourth canto. Certainly the author wants to dramatise the atmosphere so that the reader recalls the situation of canto one to three. He achieves this by using the same pictures of the previous cantos in this one. Whereas these pictures, such as "leaf", "cloud", and "wave" have existed only together with the wind, they are now existing with the author. The author thinks about being one of them and says "If I were a . . ." (43 ff.). Shelley here identifies himself with the wind, although he knows that he cannot do that, because it is impossible for someone to put all the things he has learned from life aside and enter a "world of innocence". That Shelley is deeply aware of his closedness in life and his identity shows his command in line 53. There he says "Oh, lift me up as a wave, a leaf, a cloud" (53). He knows that this is something impossible to achieve, but he does not stop praying for it. The only chance Shelley sees to make his prayer and wish for a new identity with the Wind come true is by pain or death, as death leads to rebirth. So, he wants to "fall upon the thorns of life" and "bleed" (54).

At the end of the canto the poet tells us that "a heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd" (55). This may be a reference to the years that have passed and "chained and bowed" (55) the hope of the people who fought for freedom and were literally imprisoned. With this knowledge, the West Wind becomes a different meaning. The wind is the "uncontrollable" (47) who is "tameless" (56).

One more thing that one should mention is that this canto sounds like a kind of prayer or confession of the poet. This confession does not address God and therefore sounds very impersonal.

Shelley also changes his use of metaphors in this canto. In the first cantos the wind was a metaphor explained at full length. Now the metaphors are only weakly presented—"the thorns of



life" (54). Shelley also leaves out the fourth element: the fire. In the previous cantos he wrote about the earth, the air and the water. The reader now expects the fire—but it is not there. This leads to a break in the symmetry.

## **Fifth Canto**[\[edit\]](#)

Again the wind is very important in this last canto. At the beginning of the poem the wind was only capable of blowing the leaves from the trees. In the previous canto the poet identified himself with the leaves. In this canto the wind is now capable of using both of these things mentioned before.

Everything that had been said before was part of the elements—wind, earth, and water. Now the fourth element comes in: the fire.

There is also a confrontation in this canto: Whereas in line 57 Shelley writes "me thy", there is "thou me" in line 62. This "signals a restored confidence, if not in the poet's own abilities, at least in his capacity to communicate with [ . . . ] the Wind".

It is also necessary to mention that the first-person pronouns again appear in a great frequency; but the possessive pronoun "my" predominates. Unlike the frequent use of the "I" in the previous canto that made the canto sound self-conscious, this canto might now sound self-possessed. The canto is no more a request or a prayer as it had been in the fourth canto—it is a demand. The poet becomes the wind's instrument, his "lyre" (57). This is a symbol of the poet's own passivity towards the wind; he becomes his musician and the wind's breath becomes his breath. The poet's attitude—towards the wind has changed: in the first canto the wind has been an "enchanter" (3), now the wind has become an "incantation" (65).

And there is another contrast between the two last cantos: in the fourth canto the poet had articulated himself in singular: "a leaf" (43, 53), "a cloud" (44, 53), "A wave" (45, 53) and "One too like thee" (56). In this canto, the "sense of personality as vulnerably individualised led to self-doubt" and the greatest fear was that what was "tameless, and swift, and proud" (56) will stay "chain'd and bow'd" (55). The last canto differs from that. The poet in this canto uses plural forms, for example, "my leaves" (58, 64), "thy harmonies" (59), "my thoughts" (63), "ashes and sparks" (67) and "my lips" (68). By the use of the plural, the poet is able to show that there is some kind of peace and pride in his words. It even seems as if he has redefined himself because the uncertainty of the previous canto has been blown away. The "leaves" merge with those of an entire forest and "Will" become components in a whole tumult of mighty harmonies. The use of this "Will" (60) is certainly a reference to the future. Through the future meaning, the poem itself does not only sound as something that might have happened in the past, but it may even be a kind of "prophecy" (69) for what might come—the future.

At last, Shelley again calls the Wind in a kind of prayer and even wants him to be "his" Spirit: "My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" (62). Like the leaves of the trees in a forest, his leaves will fall and decay and will perhaps soon flourish again when the spring comes. That may be why he is looking forward to the spring and asks at the end of the last canto "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (70). This is of course a rhetorical question because spring does come after winter, but the "if" suggests that it might not come if the rebirth is strong and extensive enough, and if it is not, another renewal—spring—will come anyway. Thus the question has a deeper meaning and does not only mean the change of seasons, but is a reference to death and rebirth as well. It also indicates that after the struggles and problems in life, there would always be a solution. It shows us the optimistic view of the poet about life which he would like the world to know. It is an interpretation of his saying, If you are suffering now, there will be good times ahead. But the most powerful call to the Wind are the lines: "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe/like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" Here Shelley is imploring—or really chanting to—the Wind to blow away all of his useless thoughts so that he can be a vessel for the Wind and, as a result, awaken the Earth.

## Conclusion [\[edit\]](#)

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This poem is a highly controlled text about the role of the poet as the agent of political and moral change. [\[according to whom?\]](#) This was a subject Shelley wrote a great deal about, especially around 1819, with this strongest version of it articulated the last famous lines of his "Defence of Poetry": "Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."