

Ode to the West Wind by Percy Bysshe Shelley



Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822): English Romantic Poet

- A Revolutionary and idealist
- Dedicated seeker of an ideal world
- His Poetry Expresses his spirit of revolution
- His greatest achievements are: *Queen Mab* (1813); *The Revolt of Islam* (1817); *The Cenci* (1819); *Prometheus Unbound* (1819); *Ode to the West Wind* (1819); *The Cloud* (1820); *To a Skylark* (1820); *Adonais* (1821)



<https://youtu.be/Rut80GRqnOA>

- A Defence of Poetry by Shelley
- A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.

The Ode

A relatively long, serious, and usually meditative lyric poem that treats a noble or otherwise elevated subject in a dignified and calm manner.

In Ancient Greek, Ode was originally a choral poem intended to be sung at a public event. It dramatically changed during the Romantic Movement.

Structure: Regular/Pindaric (rare, exalted tone); Irregular/Cowleyan (No fixed pattern); Horatian (equal length stanzas having the same rhyme meter)

“Ode to the West Wind” is not just an Ode but a short Sonnet Cycle in Terza Rima

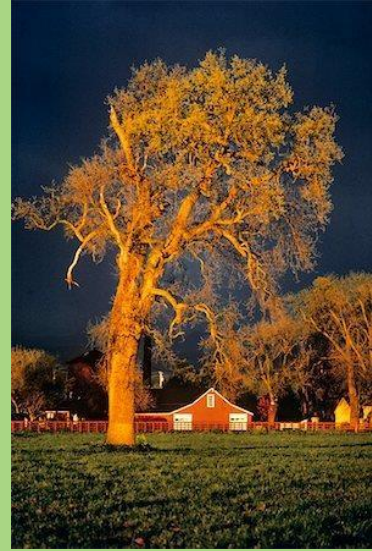
- Terza Rima
 - Invented by Dante Alighieri to structure his *The Divine Comedy*
 - Composed of Tercets woven into a rhyme scheme *aba bcb cdc ded*
 - Requires the end rhyme of the second line on one tercet to supply the rhyme for the first and third lines following the tercet

Autumn 1819

- Shelley in Florence (Italy)
- October 25th
- A stormy and windy day



Shelley wrote inside the
closed door in a single
sitting



Events in 1819 that affected the mood: Personal and Political

- 1. In June, son died of fever
- 2. Previous year infant daughter had died
- 3. In England, on 16th August a peaceful rally of 60,000 pro-democracy reformers – men, women, and children – was attacked by armed cavalry resulting in 15 deaths and over 600 injuries (St. Peter's Fields: The Peterloo Massacre)



West Wind

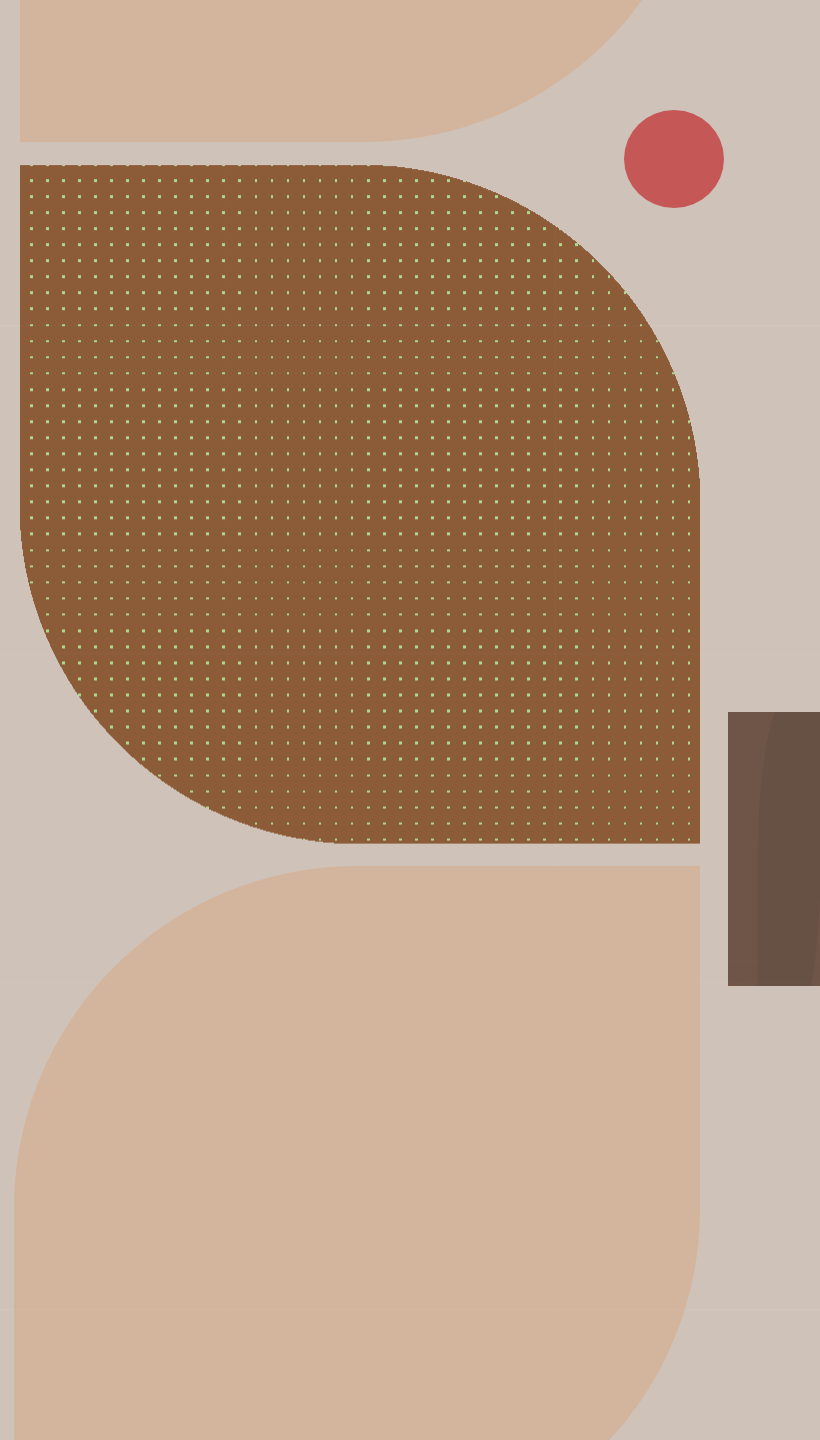
Both Autumn and Spring Winds come from the West in this part of Italy.

Autumnal West Wind sweeps the seeds to the soil until Spring Wind wakens them into life



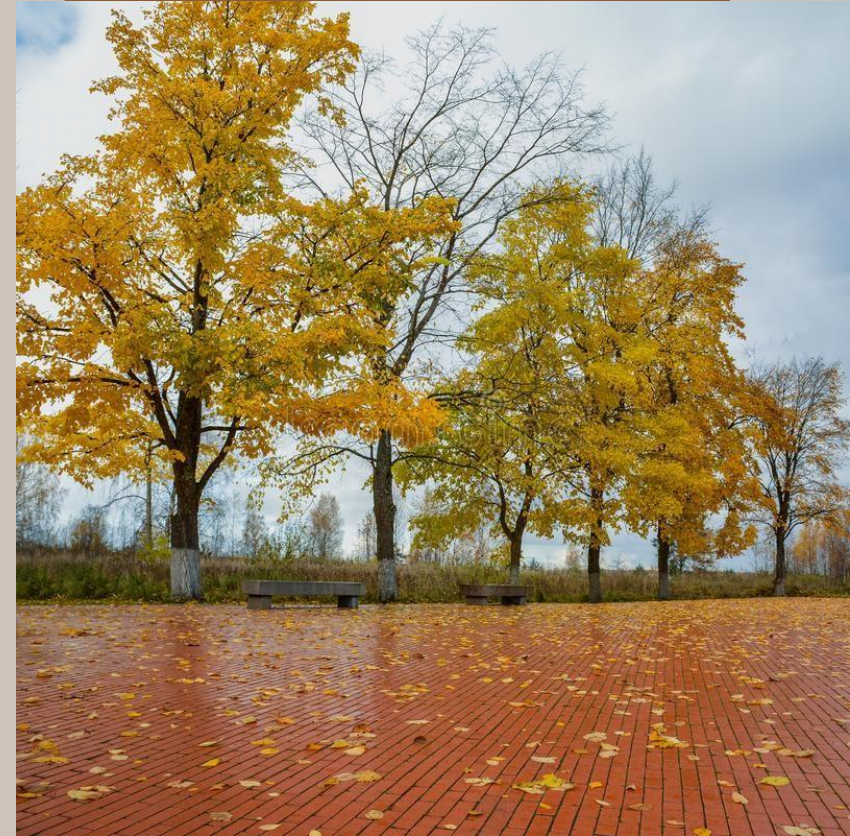
I

- 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 wingèd 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, O hear!



Canto I: Effect on the Earth

- Word Meanings
- 1. Enchanter – Magicians banishing ghosts or evil spirits
- 2. Hectic Red – Symbolising Confusion, Activity, Persistent Fever (as in tuberculosis)
- 3. Pestilence-stricken multitudes – Diseased or/and decayed leaves
- 4. Chariotest to their dark wintry bed – Carrier of the seeds to their beds, where will wait “like a corpse” until the spring
- 5. Azure – bright blue colour



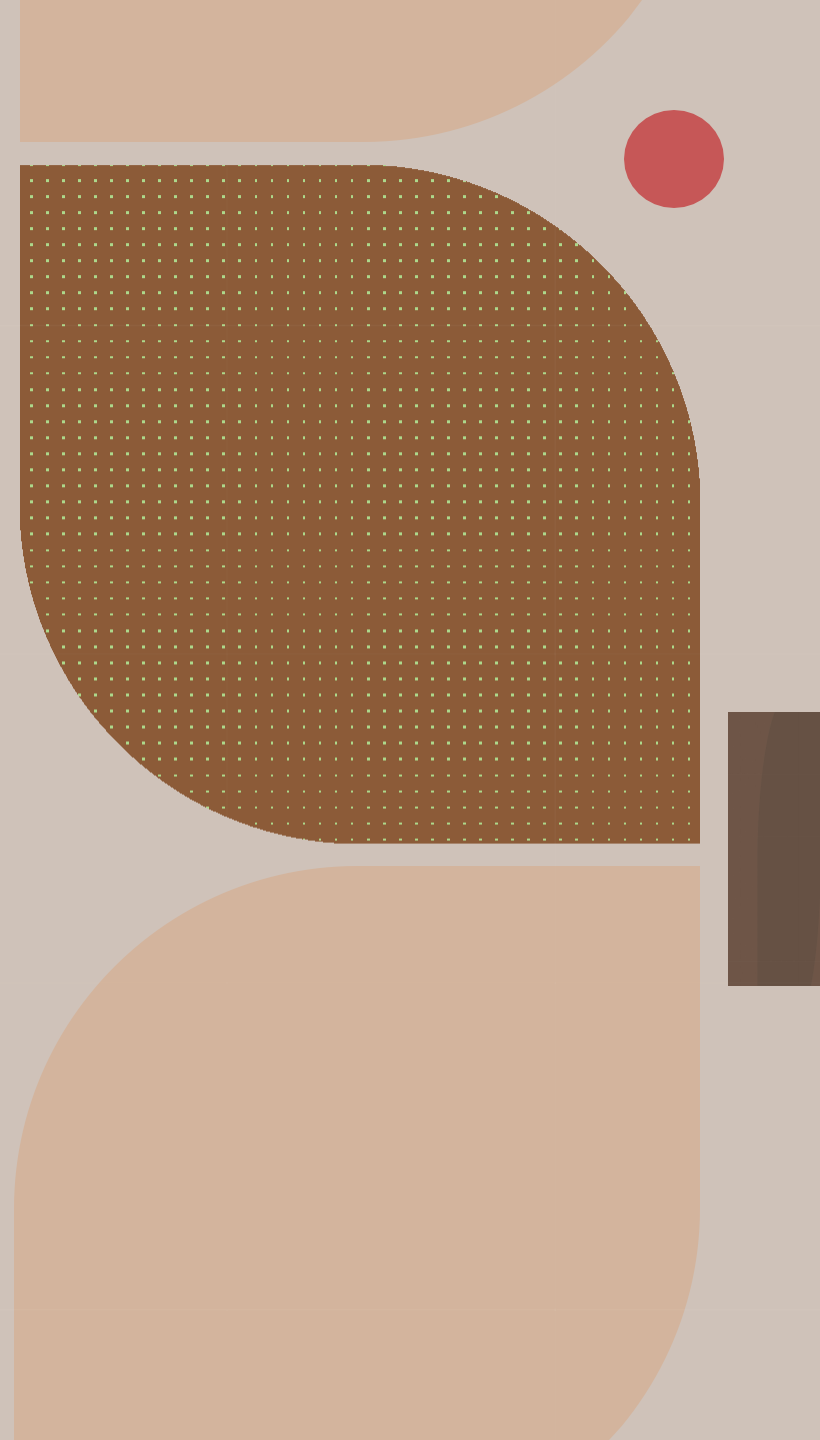
Brief Summary of Canto I

- Shelley addresses the West Wind which blows away the falling autumn leaves from the branches of trees. The leaves are of various colours – yellow, black, and red. The leaves appear to be infected with a pestilence or plague. He describes the West Wind as the chariot which carries the seeds from the flowers and takes them to their “wintry be.” Shelley concludes by calling the West Wind as “Destroyer” and “Preserver”: A destroyer because it brings the leaves down from the trees; a preserver because it helps to scatter the seeds on the earth, ensuring germination and new life in spring.



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 airy surge,
 - Like the bright hair uplifted from the head
-
- Of some fierce Mænad, 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: O hear!



Canto II: Effect on the Sky

Word Meanings:

1. Steep – Vertical
2. Commotion – Uproar; Unrest
3. Angels – Heavenly Power
4. Aery – Aerial; Ethereal; Insubstantial
5. Surge – Outpouring; Gush
6. Fierce Maenad – Frenzied state of the Greek Maenads (a religious cult to worship Dionysus)
7. Dirge – Lament for the dead, esp. a funeral rite
8. Sepulchre – Holy Sepulchre; burial chamber
9. Congregated – Assembled
10. Vapors – Abstract
11. Solid – Concrete

Here, Wild and Violent Power is associated with Death. Christian and Pagan Imageries are juxtaposed.



A Brief Summary: Canto II

- Shelley continues to address the West Wind as the bearer of the clouds from the sky, much as it moves the diseased leaves from the trees. To spell out this link, Shelley refers to the “tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean.” The clouds are being moved by the wind as the locks of fierce frenzied Maenads while worshipping god Dionysus in Greek Classical myth. Shelley concludes by likening the sound of the autumnal west wind to a funeral song, mourning the death of the year. The night sky will appear like the dome of a burial ground with the vapours from the black clouds forming the vault of the dome. Shelley waits for the darkest rain, hail and lightning in an autumnal stormy night about to explode from the vapours.



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: O hear!

Canto III: Effect on the Sea

- Word Meanings:
 1. Dreams – Summer is a time of dreams. The sea is lulled. Everything is overgrown and sweet.
 2. Pumice Isle – An island formed by light and porous volcanic rock
 3. Baiae's bay – A submerged archaeological park still holds the wonders of a Roman Sodom: the classical Roman city of Baia. The city was located over natural volcanic vents (healing medicinal hot springs). With the passage of time. The water level slowly rose due to the same volcanic vents that were once a draw to the area, and most of the ancient ruins were drowned under the shallow waters of the bay.
 4. Atlantic's level – The wind makes the ocean split into chasms
 5. Oozy – Slimy; Moisturous
 6. Sapless – Rickety; Infirm
 7. Grow gray with fear – It makes the sea-blooms and the oozy woods grow with fear and tremble and despoil themselves
 8. Despoil – Violently remove valuable possessions from plunder (almost suicidal).



A Brief Summery: Canto III

Shelley addresses the West Wind and explicates how the Wind awakens the Mediterranean Sea from its summery slumber: an isle, the Baiae's bay, and old palaces and towers overgrown with blue moss and sweet flowers.

So far, Shelley has told us that the West Wind is Wild, Powerful, and Fearful – of how the wind exerts its power over leaves, clouds, waves. Three times he has called on the West Wind to hear him. What does he want to say him?

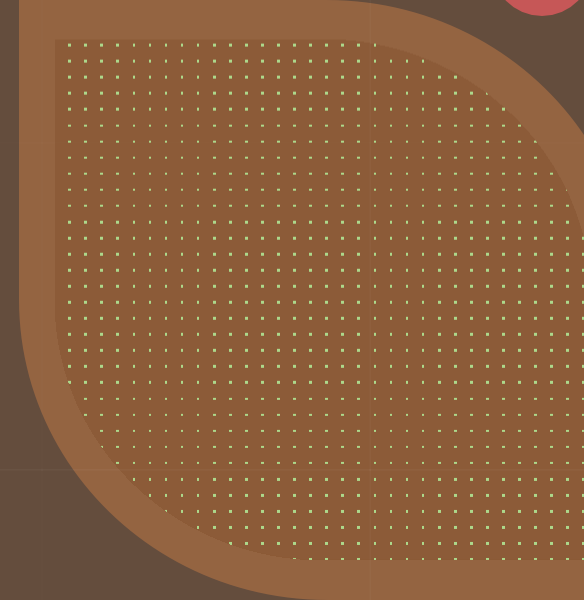


IV

- 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.
- O! 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.

Canto IV: Word Meanings

- 1. Comrade – friend/company
- 2. Outstrip – go faster
- 3. Sore – Ache; Agony;
- 4. I bleed – I suffer
- 5. Chained and bowed – Blend under pressure



A Brief Summary: Canto IV

- Here, we can observe an internal conflict: the poet-narrator's wish to be leaf, cloud or wave, which could be overpowered by the wind, on one hand, and the wish to be as one such wind, which would be similar or even his (the wind's) competitor. The poet-narrator wishes to be lifted, destroyed and reborn, reinvigorated. He exhibits self-pity as he explicates how helpless and vulnerable are humans in comparison to the West Wind.

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?

Canto V: Word Meanings

- 1. Lyre - Shelley wants to be an instrument, played upon by the wind
- 2. Tumult – Confused; Disorder
- 3. Sweet though in sadness – Sweetness behind the sadness of the autumn wind
- 4. Be thou, Spirit fierce – He wants the Spirit of the Wind to be his spirit
- 4. Impetuous – Not rash but Unbridled
- 5. Be thou me – He wants the wind to be him
- 6. Incantation – Chanting
- 7. Scatter... mankind – He wants the wind to be his Spokesperson – to spread his words among mankind – power of poetry. He does not want to be the West Wind. He wants the West Wind to be him.
- 8. If Winter...behind? – Winter is a necessary prelude to the Spring



A Brief Summary: Canto V

- The poet-narrator wants to be the musical instrument to be played upon by the Wind. He further wishes the spirit of the Wind to be his spirit. And, finally he wishes the Wind to be Him. In the penultimate lines, he employs the wind as his spokesperson who would disseminate the poet-narrator's unique knowledge and wisdom. In this way he empowers Poetry and its unfailing impact on society wherein Poetry is the greatest revolution for social change. The unique life-giving knowledge is that destruction is the necessary prelude to regeneration.

Thank You

