

**Study Material for Semester-IV**  
**CC - IX: British Romantic Literature**  
*P.B. Shelley: 'Ode to the West Wind'*  
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### Introduction:

“Ode to the West Wind” is an ode, written by Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1819 near Florence, Italy. It was originally published in 1820 by Charles in London as part of the collection *Prometheus Unbound, A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts, With Other Poems*. 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 was written in response to the loss of his son, William (born to Mary Shelley) in 1819. 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 themes of political change, revolution, and role of the poet.

### What is an Ode?

An ode (from Ancient Greek: ὕδῃ, romanized: ōdē) is a type of lyrical stanza. It is an elaborately structured poem praising or glorifying an event or individual, describing nature intellectually as well as emotionally. A classic ode is structured in three major parts: the strophe, the antistrophe, and the epode. Different forms such as the homostrophic ode and the irregular ode also enter. Greek odes were originally poetic pieces performed with musical accompaniment. As time passed on, they gradually became known as personal lyrical compositions whether sung (with or without musical instruments) or merely recited (always with accompaniment). The primary instruments used were the aulos and the lyre (the latter was the most revered instrument to the ancient Greeks).

There are three typical forms of odes: the Pindaric, Horatian, and irregular. Pindaric odes follow the form and style of Pindar. Horatian odes follow conventions of Horace; the odes of Horace deliberately imitated the Greek lyricists such as Alcaeus and Anacreon. Irregular odes use rhyme, but not the three-part form of the Pindaric ode, nor the two- or four-line stanza of the Horatian ode. The ode is a lyric poem. It conveys exalted and inspired emotions. It is a lyric in an elaborate form, expressed in a language that is imaginative, dignified and sincere. Like the lyric, an ode is of Greek origin.

## Structure of the Poem

The poem “Ode to the West Wind” consists of five sections (cantos) 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. In the last two sections, the poet speaks directly to the wind, asking for its power, to lift him up and make him its companion in its wanderings. The poem ends with an optimistic note which is that if winter days are here then spring is not very far.

## Summary and Analysis of the Poem:

The poem 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

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 personification 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

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**

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**

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**

Again and 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. These pronouns appear seven times in the fifth canto. 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**

This poem is a highly controlled text about the role of the poet as the agent of political and moral change.[citation needed] 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.”

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