

Name:

Date:

Romantic Poetry: Sir Percy Shelley

“Ode to the West Wind” 1819

Note: Shelley composed this poem in the woods near Florence, Italy. He described the day of its composition as one “when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapors which pour down the autumnal rains.”

I

1 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,
5 Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest¹ to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure² sister of the Spring³ shall blow

10 Her clarion⁴ 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

15 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,

Angels⁵ of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,

1 What is being personified in the first stanza?

2 Who/what are the “Pestilence-stricken multitudes?”

3 Why is the sister of Spring Azure? What color do you think is “Autumn?”

4 Why is the West Wind both a “Destroyer and preserver?”

¹ Chariotest: from the word chariot, to escort or drive to

² Azure: blue

³ “sister of the Spring:” The South Wind

⁴ Clarion: Trumpet producing clear, sharp, shrill tones.

⁵ Angels: Messengers

20 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad⁶, 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
25 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
30 The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice⁷ isle in Baiae's bay⁸,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

35 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
40 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;

5 What is the wind actually affecting in Part III?
Describe the physical scene:

⁶ Maenad: A priestess of Bacchus, the Greek and Roman god of wine and revelry

⁷ Pumice: Volcanic rock

⁸ Baiae's Bay: Ancient Roman resort near Naples- believed to be where Shelley is writing this poem.

If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
 45 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,
 50 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!

55 A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd
 One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre⁹, even as the forest is:
 What if my leaves are falling like its own!
 The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

60 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!
 65 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,
 70 If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

6 What is the poet asking the wind to do for him?

7 Identify and explain the simile in lines 64-70

⁹ Lyre: lute or wind harp, 3 stringed musical instrument

Questions:

1. What is an Ode?

2. A question about Structure and Tone: Is the poem successful in conveying a sense of breathless excitement?

3. What season is the West Wind most associated with? And is this really a positive force the poet should be evoking?

4. This ode has been considered a political poem, expressing Shelley's revolutionary sympathies. Can you suggest what else the wind might symbolize?

5. How many times is the word "leaves" repeated in this small poem and why is this significant? Is there another meaning for the word leaves? What does it have to do with poetry?

6. Do some research! Here are some important dates...you may have heard of some of them...

1776: The signing of the *Declaration of Independence* in the newly declared United States of America

1789: is the signing of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* in France

1819 England: Shelley writes "Ode to The West Wind" among other poems. What was going on in Shelley's world?

7. Explain the change of the seasons as a metaphor for revolution.

To a Skylark 1820

1 Hail to thee, blithe¹⁰ Spirit!
 Bird thou never wert,
 That from Heaven, or near it,
 Pourest thy full heart
 5 In profuse¹¹ strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
 From the earth thou springest
 Like a cloud of fire;
 The blue deep thou wingest,
 10 And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
 Of the sunken sun,
 O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
 Thou dost float and run;
 15 Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even¹²
 Melts around thy flight;
 Like a star of Heaven,
 In the broad day-light
 20 Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight,

Keen as are the arrows
 Of that silver sphere¹³,
 Whose intense lamp narrows
 In the white dawn clear
 25 Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

All the earth and air
 With thy voice is loud,
 As, when night is bare,

1 In line 2 the author states: "Bird thou never wert," if the bird was never a bird then what exactly is the bird?

2 In Part I (lines 1-30) what does the author primarily describe or focus on?

¹⁰ Blithe: cheerful

¹¹ Profuse: abundant; pouring out

¹² Even: evening

¹³ Silver Sphere: Morning Star

From one lonely cloud
 30 The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd.

What thou art we know not;
 What is most like thee?
 From rainbow clouds there flow not
 Drops so bright to see
 35 As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

Like a Poet hidden
 In the light of thought,
 Singing hymns unbidden,
 Till the world is wrought
 40 To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

Like a high-born maiden
 In a palace-tower,
 Soothing her love-laden
 Soul in secret hour
 45 With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower:

Like a glow-worm golden
 In a dell of dew,
 Scattering un beholden
 Its aerial hue
 50 Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view:

Like a rose embower'd
 In its own green leaves,
 By warm winds deflower'd¹⁴,
 Till the scent it gives
 55 Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged thieves¹⁵:

Sound of vernal¹⁶ showers
 On the twinkling grass,

3 What time of day is the setting for this poem?

4 To what four things does Shelley compare the lark in lines 36-55?

¹⁴ Deflowered: fully open

¹⁵ Thieves: The "warm winds"

¹⁶ Vernal: relating to Spring

Rain-awaken'd flowers,
 All that ever was
 60 Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass.

Teach us, Sprite or Bird,
 What sweet thoughts are thine:
 I have never heard
 Praise of love or wine
 65 That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.

Chorus Hymeneal¹⁷,
 Or triumphal chant,
 Match'd with thine would be all
 But an empty vaunt,
 70 A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

What objects are the fountains¹⁸
 Of thy happy strain?
 What fields, or waves, or mountains?
 What shapes of sky or plain?
 75 What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

With thy clear keen joyance
 Languor cannot be:
 Shadow of annoyance
 Never came near thee:
 80 Thou lovest: but ne'er knew love's sad satiety¹⁹.

Waking or asleep,
 Thou of death must deem²⁰
 Things more true and deep
 Than we mortals dream,
 85 Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

We look before and after,

¹⁷ Chorus Hymeneal: Marriage song; named after Hymen, the Greek god of marriage

¹⁸ Fountains: sources, inspirations

¹⁹ Satiety: State of being filled to excess

²⁰ Deem: know

And pine for what is not:
 Our sincerest laughter
 With some pain is fraught;
 90 Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Yet if²¹ we could scorn
 Hate, and pride, and fear;
 If we were things born
 Not to shed a tear,
 95 I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures
 Of delightful sound,
 Better than all treasures
 That in books are found,
 100 Thy skill to poet were²², thou scorner of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness
 That thy brain must know,
 Such harmonious madness
 From my lips would flow
 105 The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

5 Does the last stanza of the poem hold out a promise for curing society's ills? What does the author want the bird to teach him? Explain!

Questions:

1. Shelley wrote the poem "To a Skylark" in 1820, just two years before he drowned before the age of 30. In hindsight, what is ironic about the writing of this poem so close to the end of Shelley's life?
2. What form does each stanza take?
3. How many lines are in each one?

²¹ If: Even if

²² Were: would be

4. What is the difference between all the lines in each stanza and the last line? Why is the last line of each stanza so long? What does it describe?