Romantic Poetry Lecture Notes

Percy Bysshe Shelley

**Background**

**Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792-1822) is one of the most famous poets in all of English literature. He was one of a group of poets who became known as **The Romantics**.

Born in Horsham, Sussex, he came from a wealthy family and was in line to inherit both riches and his grandfather's role as an MP. He went to Eton College and then Oxford. He was expelled from university for writing about atheism (not believing in God) which led to him to fall out with his father who disinherited him. In the same year, 1811, he eloped and married aged 19. His bride, Harriet Westbrook, was only 16. They moved to the Lake District where he continued to write.

Three years later, Shelley left for Europe with another woman, Mary Godwin (who later became **Mary Shelley** and wrote Frankenstein). Shelley had children by both women. In 1816, Harriet Shelley's body was recovered from a lake - it was thought she had killed herself. Three weeks later, Shelley married Mary.

Shelley drowned at sea during a sailing trip to Italy.

**“Ozymadias”**

Shelley was well known as a 'radical' during his lifetime and some people think *Ozymandias* reflects this side of his character. Although it is about the remains of a statue of Ozymandias (another name for the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II) it can be read as a criticism of people or systems that become huge and believe themselves to be invincible.

**Commentary**

The narrator of Shelley's poem says he met a traveller from an "antique" (ancient) land and then tells us the story the traveller told him. The man had seen the remains of a huge statue in the desert. There were two enormous legs without a trunk and next to them lay a damaged "visage" (face). At the foot of the statue were words which reflected the arrogance and pride of Ozymandias. Those words seem very hollow now as the magnificent statue is destroyed and none of the pharaoh's works have lasted.

# Structure and language

## Form

Ozymandias is a *sonnet* (a poem of 14 lines), although it doesn't have the same, simple rhyme scheme or punctuation that most sonnets have. Some lines are split by full stops and the rhyme is irregular at times. It is written in *iambic pentameter*, which Shakespeare used widely in his plays and sonnets.

## Structure

The first line and a half up to the colon are the narrator's words, the rest are those of the traveller he meets. There are no clear *stanzas* as such. Instead, it is one, 14-line block of text that is split up with lots of punctuation throughout.

## Sound

Although it doesn't have an easy, memorable rhyme scheme, the poem is**powerful when read aloud**. The end of lines one and three rhyme ("land / sand") but so do the first and last words of line three ("stand / sand") which gives it extra power. Lines 12 and 14 also rhyme and words such as ("decay / away") mean that the poem ends with a feeling of mystery and emptiness. The use of*iambic pentameter* means that it has a regular sound.

**Imagery**

Shelley creates a memorable image of this"vast" and once great statue, now in ruins. He also places it in the middle of a huge desert with nothing else around it, which highlights its fall from grace. What was once so magnificent - a symbol of the king's great power - is now "sunk... shattered... lifeless". We have no sympathy whatsoever with the statue or the king though, due to some of Shelley's descriptions: "sneer of cold command... hand that mocked them" and the arrogance of the words displayed at the bottom.

**Attitudes, Themes, and Ideas**

It is likely that Shelley told the tale of the fall of this once-great king to make a general statement about politics in his day. He was not a supporter of the royal family. No matter how great a king might be, he isn't immortal - neither he nor his works will last forever.

* **Even the mightiest will fall**: Ozymandias thought his works would last forever and would be above everyone else's. Not true. Nothing is left intact and his own statue is in ruins.
* **You can't beat time**. Even a king dies and so will all the things he has built.
* **Pride comes before a fall**. Ozymandias' boasts about his own greatness seem very hollow now.
* **The power of art and words**. The only thing that does last is part of the statue and the powerful words on the inscription.

**“Ode to the West Wind”**

## Explanation: "Ode to the West Wind"

### Lines 1-14

In this first of the five sections of the poem, the speaker begins to define the domains and the powers of the West Wind. While stanza II addresses the wind's influence on the sky, and stanza III discusses its effects on the sea, stanza I describes the wind's effects on the land. The autumn breezes scatter dead leaves and seeds on the forest soil, where they eventually fertilize the earth and take root as new growth. Both "Destroyer and Preserver" (line 14), the wind ensures the cyclical regularity of the seasons.

These themes of regeneration and the interconnectedness of death and life, endings and beginnings, runs throughout "Ode to the West Wind."The wind is, of course, more than simply a current of air. In Greek and Latin – languages with which Shelley was familiar – the words for "wind," "inspiration," "soul," and "spirit" are all related. Shelley's "West Wind" thus seems to symbolize an inspiring spiritual power that moves everywhere, and affects everything.

### Lines 2-3

These lines ostensibly suggest that, like a sorcerer might frighten away spirits, the wind scatters leaves. But one might also interpret "leaves dead" as forgotten books, and "ghosts" as writers of the past; in this sense, the winds of inspiration make way for new talent and ideas by driving away the memories of the old.

### Lines 4-5

The colors named here might simply indicate the different shades of the leaves, but it is also possible to interpret the leaves as symbols of humanity's dying masses. In this analysis, the colors represent different cultures: Asian, African, Caucasian, and Native American. This idea is supported by the phrase "Each like a corpse within its grave" in line 8 that could indicate that each person takes part in the natural cycle of life and death.

### Lines 6-7

Here, the wind is described as a chariot that carries leaves and seeds to the cold earth. This comparison gives the impression that the wind has some of the aspects of those who are associated with chariots – gods and powerful rulers.

### Line 8

The leaves are personified as people within their graves, an image that harkens back to lines 4 and 5, where the leaves are considered as diseased "multitudes" of people.

**Lines 9-12**

In Greek and Roman mythology, the spring west wind was masculine, as was the autumnal wind. Here, the speaker refers to the spring wind as feminine, perhaps to stress its role as nurturer and life-giver. She is pictured as awakening Nature with her energetic "clarion," which is a type of medieval trumpet.

### Lines 13-14

At the conclusion of the first stanza, the speaker identifies the wind as the powerful spirit of nature that incorporates both destruction and continuing life. In fact, these two processes are said to be related; without destruction, life cannot continue. At the end of line 14 is the phrase "Oh hear!" that will be repeated at the end of stanzas 2 and 3. This refrain emphasizes sound, which seems appropriate given that wind, an invisible force, is the poem's central subject.

### Lines 15-28

In stanza II, the wind helps the clouds shed rain, as it had helped the trees shed leaves in stanza I. Just as the dead foliage nourishes new life in the forest soil, so does the rain contribute to Nature's regenerative cycle.

### Lines 16-18

This passage has been heavily attacked by critics like F. R. Leavis for its lack of concreteness and apparently disconnected imagery; others have cited Shelley's knowledge of science, and the possibility that these poetic phrasings might indeed be based on natural fact. The loose clouds, for example, are probably cirrus clouds, harbingers (or "angels" as it is put in line 18) of rain. As the leaves of stanza I have been shed from boughs, these clouds have been shaken from the heavier cloud masses, or "boughs of Heaven and Ocean" (line 17). In Latin, "cirrus" means "curl" or "lock of hair"; it is thus appropriate that these clouds resemble a Maenad's "bright hair" (line 20) and are referred to as the "locks of the approaching storm" (line 23).

### Lines 20-23

When Shelley was in Florence, he saw a relief sculpture of four maenads. These worshipers of the Roman god of wine and vegetation, Bacchus (in Greek mythology, Dionysus) were wild, dancing women with streaming hair. Here, the speaker compares the appearance of the cirrus clouds streaked across the horizon with the maenads' blown tresses. This image seems especially appropriate in that Bacchus/Dionysus is associated with the natural world and the wind and clouds are primary elements of nature.

### Lines 23-28

The wail of the wind is compared to a song of grief, as if it were mourning the "dying" year. As the year draws to a close, Nature prepares for the funeral. The coming night is described as a "sepulcher," a burial tomb that will be marked by lightning and hail from a storm. This last day will end in darkness, under storm clouds.

### Lines 29-42

In stanza III, the West Wind wields its power over the sea; but unlike the first two stanzas, this one is introduced by an image of calm, peace, and sensuality. The Mediterranean Sea is pictured as smooth and tranquil, sleeping alongside the old Italian town of Baiae. Once a playground of Roman emperors, Baiae sunk as a result of volcanic activity and is now the bed of a lush underwater garden. But the wind can also "waken" (line 29) the sea and disturb the summer tranquility of the waters by ushering in an autumn storm.

### Lines 32-33

In 1818, Shelley himself had sailed past the Bay of Baiae; in a December letter to Thomas Love Peacock, he enthusiastically describes the "ruins of its antique grandeur standing like rocks in the transparent sea under our boat."

### Lines 36-38

Beginning at the end of line 36, the speaker disrupts the peace of the seascape and reminds the West Wind of its power to churn up wild, whitecapped surf.

### Lines 39-42

The lush sea foliage, which is "sapless" because the plants are underwater, is aware of the wind's ability to destroy; remembering the havoc of cold weather storms, the vegetation is drained of color, as a person turns pale with fear, or as plant life on Earth fades in the fall. In a note to these lines, Shelley wrote: "The vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers, and of lakes, sympathizes with that of the land in the change of seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it." The natural cycles of death and regeneration thus continue even underwater, with the aid of the West Wind.

### Lines 43-56

After three stanzas of describing the West Wind's power, which are all echoed in the first three lines of Stanza IV, the speaker asks to be moved by this spirit. For the first time in "Ode to the West Wind," the wind confronts humanity in the form of speaker of the poem. No longer an idealistic young man, this speaker has experienced sorrow, pain, and limitations. He stumbles, even as he asks to be spiritually uplifted. At the same time, he can recall his younger years when he was "tameless, and swift, and proud" like the wind. These recollections help him to call on the wind for inspiration and new life. In this manner, the poem suggests that humans, too, are part of the never-ending natural cycle of death and rebirth.

### Lines 47-52

In line 47, the speaker begins to explain that, as an idealistic youth, he used to "race" the wind – and win, in his own mind. But now, as an older man, he could never imagine challenging the wind's power.

### Lines 53-54

In these well-known lines often mocked by Shelley's detractors, the patterns of sea, earth, and sky are recalled as the speaker asks to be raised from his sorrows by the inspirational West Wind. He seems almost Christ-like in his suffering, the "thorns of life" recalling the crown of thorns worn by Christ during the crucifixion.

### Lines 55-56

The Christ-like image of the speaker continues here; his life experiences have been heavy crosses for him to bear and have weighed him down. And yet there still seem to be sparks of life and hope within him. He can still recall when he possessed many of the wind's powers and qualities.

### Lines 57-70

If Stanza IV is the explanation of why the West Wind is being invoked, Stanza V is the prayer itself. The requests of the speaker seem to gather speed much as the wind does; while he begins by asking to be moved by the wind, he soon asks to become one with this power. As a breeze might ignite a glowing coal, the speaker asks for the wind to breathe new life into him and his poetic art. With his last question, the speaker reminds his audience that change is on the horizon, be it personal or natural, artistic or political.The lyre referred to in line 57 might be the Eolian lyre or harp, its name derived from Eolus, god of the winds. This lyre is a box with strings stretched across an opening. When the wind moves through it, the eolian harp emits musical sounds. Many Romantic writers, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his poem "The Eolian Harp", used the instrument as a symbol for the human imagination that is played upon by a greater power. Here, the speaker asks to be the West Wind's lyre, its means of music and communication.

### Lines 58-62

Here, the speaker seems to accept his sorrows and sufferings; he realizes that the wind's power may allow him to add harmony to autumn's music. He is still sad, but he recognizes a sweetness in his pain: he is part of a natural cycle, and will have a chance to begin again as both man and poet. The speaker's growing strength is hinted at by the powerful exclamations in lines 61 and 62.

### Lines 63-64

The wind blew leaves over the forest floor, fertilizing the soil; now, the speaker asks the wind to scatter his timeworn ideas and writings across the earth in hopes of inspiring new thoughts and works. Note the word play on "leaves," which can be found either on trees or in books.

### Lines 65-67

In "A Defence of Poetry," Shelley wrote that "the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness." In asking the wind to fan – and hopefully arouse – the dying embers of his words, the speaker seems to be echoing this idea.

### Lines 68-69

These lines recall the angel's "clarion" of line 10, awakening the earth from wintry slumber. The speaker here asks to become the poet-prophet of the new season of renewal.

### Lines 69-70

Shelley originally framed the last two lines as a statement; phrased as a question, the poem ends on a note of expectancy rather than affirmation. The speaker has made his case and plea to assist the wind in the declaration of a new age – but he has not yet received an answer. Along with his audience, he breathlessly awaits a "yes", delivered on the wings of the wind.

**Source:** Exploring Poetry, Gale, 1997.