

# Ode to the West Wind

## I

Terza Rima: Each of the seven parts contains five stanzas, four three line stanzas and a two line couplet, all in iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme of terza rima means that the first and third lines rhyme in each stanza and the middle one does not; then the end sound of the middle line becomes the rhyme for the first and third lines in the next stanza. The final couplet rhymes with the middle line of the last three-line stanza.

Shelley believed in reform and revolution and wanted his message spread. Some believe that this poem is an expression of that desire.

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,

Alliteration and apostrophe, implied metaphor: wind = enchanter with power over ghosts

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

Sinister tone

The first three cantos are about the qualities of the "wind" and each ends with the poet calling upon the wind to "hear!"

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

East wind—  
color contrast

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;

The west wind is the destroyer because it blows the last leaves off the trees and the preserver because it scatters the seeds.

10

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and preserver; hear, **O 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,

The clouds are like dropping leaves—reminds us of the dead leaves in the first canto. The "tangled boughs" of heaven and ocean probably means that it's hard to distinguish between them in the sky line.

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

20

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

A wildly emotional woman who took part in Dionysian orgies

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!**

In this stanza, the wind is not just earthly, but in the skies as well, affecting not just leaves but clouds, which are bigger and messengers of rain and lightning.

### III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams  
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay, 30  
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,

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

Baiæ's bay contains visible Roman ruins underwater. The "moss and flowers" would be seaweed.

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  
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

The West Wind even has power over the sea.

40

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,  
And tremble and despoil themselves: **O 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

Focus changes from addressing the West Wind to the speaker (I). The poet will use lots of first person pronouns from now on.

45

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

50

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
**O! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!**

He says if he were a leaf or a cloud or a wave or even a wild boy, he wouldn't have to ask the wind to lift him, but he's been weighted down by hours and can no longer soar by himself.

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.

55

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

Whereas before the wind was only capable of blowing leaves and clouds and waves, now it is a creator and the poet's words are the leaves to be blown.

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

60

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

65

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

He wants to be like the wind's lyre and for the wind to blow his thoughts over the universe so that they might become seeds to cause a new birth.

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

70

Not just a reference to a changing season, but to death and rebirth as well—if there are struggles, there will always be solutions. It is a poem about the poet as an agent of change.

Shelley opposed Britain's monarchy, thinking it was a form of tyranny. In 1819, England's nobility were afraid that working class citizens would imitate French peasants and rebels and attempt a revolution. ON August 16, thousands of people came to a rally in Manchester to urge parliamentary reform and protest laws that inflated the cost of corn and wheat. Nervous public officials ended up killing 11 protesters and injuring more than 500 others. Shelley wrote *The Masque of Anarchy* in 1819 to encourage nonviolent action against the government. Some people believe that his poem, also written in 1819, refers to his desire to spread his reformist ideas.