

**Poetry**  
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**Lecture 38**  
**Percy Bysshe Shelley**

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**Percy Bysshe Shelley**  
**(1792-1822)**



- Historical and Literary Context
- P B Shelley
- A Defense of Poetry
- "Ode to the West Wind"
- Analysis
- A Linguistic Reading
- An ICT Reading



Hello. We will discuss Percy Bysshe Shelley in this lecture and his 'Ode to the West Wind'. We see the historical literary context of Shelley and his life his views on poetry from his essay on a defence of poetry, we read the poem, analyze the poem, linguistically, rhetorically and then we have our own linguistic reading from a critic and then, we have a very interesting reading called ICT reading, that is, information and communication technology reading. I hope you will enjoy it.

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## Historical and Literary Context



- The American Revolution (1775-1783)
- The French Revolution (1789-1799)
- The British reactions to the revolutions
- The Peterloo Massacre (1819) suppressing the voice of freedom of the people at St Peter's Field in Manchester
- The anarchism of William Godwin (1756-1836)
- The political activism of Thomas Paine (1737-1809)
- *The Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, 1800, and 1802



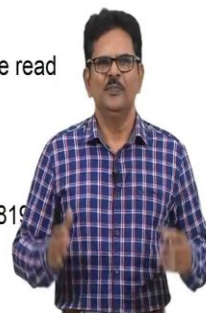
First, the historical and literary context. This is common to all romantic poets. We have this American revolution, the French revolution, the reactions of the British people to these various revolutions and also, we have this Peterloo Massacre which suppressed the voice of common people at Saint Peter's field in Manchester which in fact irritated poets and many publics. Two major thinkers influenced romantic poets in general especially Shelley, one is William Godwin another is Thomas Paine. We also have this publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 announcing this romantic movement.

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## Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)



- An aristocrat by birth and an idealistic rebel by choice
- Opposed to monarchy and authority
- Influenced by William Godwin and Thomas Paine
- Eloped with women and poetry
- Supported atheism, Irish nationalism, and vegetarianism
- Became the Promethean and Satanic hero that he read and wrote about in his poems
- Known for both long and short poems:
  - *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), *Adonais* (1820)
  - "To a Skylark" (1820), "*Ode to the West Wind*" (1819)



Percy Bysshe Shelley was an aristocratic by birth and an idealistic rebel by choice. He could have easily lived a very comfortable life but he chose to rebel against his own society and

suffer throughout his life. He was opposed to monarchy and authority. He was influenced by William Godwin and Thomas Paine because of their own democratic free thoughts and views.

A strange case of this elopement with women and poetry, we have in Shelley. He was a very interesting person in that case. He supported Atheism, Irish nationalism and Vegetarianism which were not so common in those days. He became the Promethean and Satanic hero that he read and wrote about in his own poems. He is known for both long and short poems. Some of the well-known poems are 'Prometheus Unbound,' 'Adonais,' 'To a Skylark' and of course 'Ode to the West Wind.'

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### Shelley's A Defence of Poetry



- Written in 1820 but published in 1841
- The poetic credo of Shelley proclaiming the visionary and prophetic role of the poet
- Shelley prefers the imaginative mode of understanding life and the world to the rational mode.
- He believes that poetry can synthesize and unify disparate elements to create harmony in the world.
- Poetry can reveal the truth by removing "the veil of familiarity from the world."
- If poetry is a liberator, the poet is a hero.
- Hence, his claim, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."



Shelley seriously interested in the poetic art defended poetry. He wrote an essay called 'A Defence of Poetry' in 1820 but it was published only in 1841. We can consider this, the poetic credo of Shelley proclaiming the visionary and prophetic role of the poet. Shelley prefers the imaginative mode of understanding of life to the rational mode. He believes that poetry can synthesize and unify disparate elements to create harmony in the world.

For him poetry can reveal the truth by removing the veil of familiarity from the world. He considered poetry to be a liberator and so we can say the poet is a hero. This is the most famous statement from this essay on a defence of poetry; 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.'

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## Ode to the West Wind



- A widely recognized masterpiece of Shelley despite the critical hostility against him
- Written in 1819 and published in 1820
- A poem of 70 lines in five stanzas
- Each stanza is like a sonnet with 14 lines
- Three terza rime and a couplet
- The west wind is a destroyer and a preserver
- It is also a savior and regenerator of a just and equitable life



Let us come to Ode to the West Wind now. This is a widely recognized masterpiece of Shelley, despite the critical hostility against him. He was criticized by various readers of his day and people who came after him. They were not happy with the kind of expressive emotions that we find in his poetry.

However, this poem is considered to be one of the greatest poems this was written in 1819 and published in 1820. It has 70 lines in five stanzas. Each stanza is like a sonnet, an independent sonnet with 14 lines but they are put together. Shelley has used this terza rime format with a couplet. In this poem the West Wind is a destroyer and also a preserver. Further it is also a savior and regenerator of a just and equitable life and society.

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## Ode to the West Wind - 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, 3

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed 6

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



Let us begin with this poem directly now:

“O wild West Wind, thou breadth 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 winter bed  
The winged seeds where they lie cold and low  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow.”

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### Ode to the West Wind - I



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: 12

**Wild Spirit**, which art moving everywhere;  
**Destroyer and preserver**; hear, oh hear! 14



“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, oh hear!

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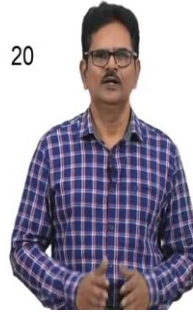
## Ode to the West Wind - II



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

20



Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge  
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,  
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

“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 Maenad, even from the dim verge

Of the horizon to the zenith's height,

The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

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## Ode to the West Wind - II



Of the dying year, to which this closing night  
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre, 25  
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere  
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear! 28



“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: oh hear!

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## Ode to the West Wind - 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 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 35  
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou  
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers



Stanza 3,

“Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams

The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,

Lull’d by the coil of 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 bars and flowers.

So sweet the sense faints picturing them! Thou

For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

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### Ode to the West Wind - III



Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below  
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear  
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know 40

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,  
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!



“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: oh hear!

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### Ode to the West Wind - 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 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 50  
Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven



Stanza 4,

“If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;

If I wear 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 wear as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of the wanderings over Heaven,

As then when to outstrip the skiey speed

Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven

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## Ode to the West Wind - IV



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!**

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



“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!**

A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd

One too like thee: tameless, and swift and proud.

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## Ode 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,

60

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,



Stanza 5,

“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 me dead thoughts over the universe

**Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!**

And by the incantation of these verse,

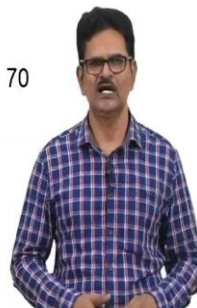
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### Ode to the West Wind - V



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

The trum|pet of |a pro|phesy! |O Wind,  
If Win|ter comes, |can Spring |be far |behind? 70



“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?

This is considered to be one of the greatest poems. As we said earlier and the last line; If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind, is the essence of romantic optimism especially of Shelley.

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### Thematic Contrast



- Wind and Earth
- West and East
- Dark and Light
- Dream and Reality
- Life and Death
- Destroyer and Preserver
- Heaven and Ocean/Hell
- Fire and Rain
- Controllable and uncontrollable
- Man and Nature
- Harmony and Disharmony
- Spirit and Body
- Winter and Spring
- Dirge and Ode



Let us see the thematic contrast here; on the one hand we have Wind and Earth. Like this we have, West and East, Dark and Light, Dream and Reality, Life and Death, Destroyer and Preserver, Heaven and Ocean or Hell, Fire and Rain, Controllable and uncontrollable, Man and Nature, Harmony and Disharmony, Spirit and Body, Winter and Spring, Dirge and Ode.

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## Poetic Devices

- **Apostrophe:** O wild West Wind
- **Assonance and Consonance:** wild West Wind; wWW
- **Personification:** thou breath of Autumn's being
- **Simile & Inversion:** like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing
- **Asso/Conso:** Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red
- **Assonance/Consonance:** Pestilence-stricken multitudes
- **Metaphor:** night, the dome of a vast sepulchre
- **Metaphor:** seeds and words, Earth and Mind
- **Simile:** a leaf, a cloud, a wave
- **Rhetorical question:** If winter comes, can spring be far behind? (72)



The poetic devices are listed here for us. Apostrophe, we find in the poet's address to the wild West Wind, 'O wild West Wind.' He addresses the wind throughout the poem. We have assonance and consonance in this first line itself. Wild West Wind, 'va' is a semi vowel so we call it assonance and this 'da' sound represents consonance. So, we have consonance here.

We have increased (wWW). the shape of 'w' to indicate how it progresses wild West Wind. Then we have personification in this line 'thou breadth of Autumn's being;' this wind is the breath Autumn is personified as a being with the power. Then we have simile and inversion 'like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,' 'like ghosts from a fleeing enchanter' would be normal word order, so we can consider this a word inversion.

Then we have assonance and consonants in this line 'yellow and black and pale and hectic red;' some of you who can remember polysyndeton can also see this and, and, and here in this case; assonance and consonance we have in the next line as well, 'pestilence-stricken multitudes.'

Metaphor we can see in 'night,' 'the dome of a vast sepulchre.' Further we can see metaphor in seeds and words earth and mind. Further, we can see simile a leaf, a cloud, a wave; figuratively the poet wants to be associated with the leaf, the cloud, the wave and all that. We have the most famous rhetorical question in English literature in the last line of this poem: 'If winter comes can spring be far behind?'

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## Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** ABA, BCB, CDC, DED, Italian terza rima
- **Couplet:** AA at the end of every stanza
- A rare rhyme used in English poetry
- Modelled after Dante's *The Divine Comedy*
- **Iambic pentameter** with variations of trochee:  
The trum|pet of |a pro|phecy! |O Wind,  
If Win|ter comes, |can Spring |be far |behind?
- **Iambic hexameter:** rare lines  
Shook from| the ta|ngled boughs| of Hea|ven and| Ocean



We have some Rhyme, Rhythm and Meter in this poem. The rhyme scheme is ABA, BCB, CDC, DED and so on. This is the example of the Italian terza rima. We also have a couplet at the end of every stanza; 'AA,' this is a rare rhyme used by Dante in his Divine Comedy but Shelley has attempted in English poetry.

We have the usual traditional Iambic pentameter with some variations here:

'the trumpet of your prophecy O wind

If Winter comes, can spring be far behind?'

Further, we have one more, rare instance of an Iambic hexameter. That is, we have 12 syllables in this line 'shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean.' So we have six feet in this particular line.

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## Overall Impression



- The poet addresses the west wind as a symbol of revolutionary spirit to bring about radical changes in the world to establish an egalitarian society.
- He uses the free terza rima form and the restrained sonnet form to express his uncontrollable anger for the noble cause of a harmonious society.
- He coopts the natural power of the wild west wind to lift him and spread his words of equality and liberty.
- He recognizes the constraint of a natural cycle from seeding to birthing for renewal through destruction.



To give an overall impression of this poem, we can list these following points. The poet addresses the West Wind as a symbol of a revolutionary spirit to bring about radical changes in the world to establish an egalitarian world, where everyone will be considered equal.

He uses the free terza rima form and the restrained sonnet form to express his uncontrollable anger for the noble cause of a harmonious society. We have to remember that, Shelley was born in an aristocratic society, he enjoyed everything but he found his own people suffering for various needs. The poet coopts the natural power of the wild West Wind to lift him and spread his words of equality and liberty throughout the world. He recognizes the constraint of a natural cycle from seeding to birthing for renewal through destruction.

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### A Linguistic Reading (Pixton, 1972)



- Six commandments/ imperatives
- Oh lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud  
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed
- Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:  
➤ 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!
- Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind
- Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth
- Pixton shows how the poet initially makes supplications but moves to the possession of **immortal power**.



A critic called Pixton has offered this linguistic reading by noting the commands or the imperatives in this poem. There are six commandments or imperatives in this poem;

Oh lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud

I fall upon thy thorns of life! I bleed!

The next one, Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:

The third one is, Be thou, Spirit fierce,

My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Fourth, Drive my dead thoughts over the universe

Like wither'd leaves to quicken any birth!

Next, Scatter, as from an extinguished hearth

Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind

And the last, Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth.

Pixton shows how the poet initially makes supplications but moves to the possession of the immortal power from the West Wind. Initially, he requires a wind and later on he gains that power and becomes an immortal power himself in his own poetry.



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## An ICT Reading (SPD)



- **WWW:** World Wide Web; a collection of information
- **The Internet:** a global network of networks which enables the information traffic freely around the world.
- **WWW in Shelley:** The Wild West Wind
- **The internet in Shelley:** The written and Printed Poem
- **Shelley Today:** The wild west wind on the internet scattering and spreading the revolutionary idea of we fall on the thorns of life and we need to lift ourselves and our society by removing the film of familiarity.
- **Optimism:** "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"
- Poetry Foundation, Representative Poetry Online, Blog



As we said earlier, we have a very interesting case of this ICT reading, that is, Information and Communication Technology Reading. Today 'WWW' is a norm, that is a virtual world we live in. This world wide web is actually a collection of information. To operate this, we need this internet; this is a global network of networks which enables information traffic freely move from one part to another part of the world.

We find this WWW in Shelley, in his poem, 'The Wild West Wind.' What is the internet in Shelley" that is, the written and printed poem, that we have. Today, Shelley can be found in so many websites. So, we can say, the wild west wind on the internet scattering and spreading the revolutionary idea of how we fall on the thorns of life and how we need to lift ourselves and our society removing the film of familiarity.

All kinds of social media today do what Shelley was trying to do through his poem Ode to the West Wind in his own day. He exhibits this spirit of optimism throughout the poem especially in the last line, 'if winter comes can spring be far behind?' This poem and many other poems all the ideas, the voices of people are found on various websites.

Poems are found on the website of poetry foundation, representative poetry online and in many blogs. So, we can say, this communication technology has done what Shelley was doing in his own day through this poem 'Ode to the West Wind.'

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## Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- P B Shelley
- A Defense of Poetry
- "Ode to the West Wind"
- Analysis
- A Linguistic Reading
- An ICT Reading



In summary, we have seen the historical and literary context in which Shelley was writing his poems, his critical essay 'The Defence of Poetry.' We saw this poem 'Ode to the West Wind,' expressing the spirit of optimism, we find in romantic poetry. We analyze the poem linguistically, rhetorically and then gave our own overall impression. One of the critics who identified the list of imperatives in the poem, has offered a linguistic reading saying that, the poet becomes a spirit at the end of the poem. We also added this ICT reading, to indicate that the spirit of, voice of people will always come through different forms as Shelley has shown in his 'Ode to the West Wind' which now today we can connect with the world wide web, which is very useful to us through the internet conveying, spreading, scattering, the voices of people all over the world.

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## References



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Some references are here. You can enjoy reading some of these essays . We have to notice one special journal: Keats-Shelley journal. It is very interesting to see some of the poets are able to inspire people to launch journals like this and then continue this journal for a long time for posterity. Thank you.