Ode to the West Wind

POEM TEXT

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,

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

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!

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 aëry 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

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!

III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where 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
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

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

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;
If I were 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 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

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.

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,
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,

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?

SUMMARY

1.

You, the unruly west wind, are the essence of the Fall. You are invisible, but you scatter the fallen leaves: they look like ghosts running away from a witch or wizard. The leaves are yellow and black, white and wild red. They look like crowds of sick people. You carry the seeds, as if you're their chariot, down to the earth where they'll sleep all winter. They lie there, cold and humble, like dead bodies in their graves, until your blue sister, the Spring wind, blows her trumpet and wakes up the earth. Then she brings out the buds. They are like flocks of sheep; they feed in the open air. And she fills the meadows and the hills with sweet smells and beautiful colors. Unruly west wind, moving everywhere: you are both an exterminator and a savior. Please listen to me!

2.

In the high and whirling reaches of the sky, you send the clouds twirling: they look like dead leaves, shaken loose from the branches of the heavens and the sea. They are like angels, full of rain and lightning. Or they are scattered across the blue sky, like the blond hair of a wildly dancing girl who is a follower of Dionysus. The clouds stretch from the horizon to the top of the sky like the hair of the coming storm. West wind, you sad song of the end of the year. The night sky will be like the dome of a vast tomb, the clouds you gathered like archways running across it. And from the solid top of that tomb, dark rain, lightning, and hail will fall down. Listen to me!

3.

You woke the Mediterranean from its summer dreams. That blue sea, which lay wrapped in its crystal-clear currents, was snoozing near an island made of volcanic rock in the Bay of Baiae, near Naples. In the waters of the bay you saw the ruins of old palaces and towers, now submerged in the water's thicker form of daylight. These ruins were overgrown with sea plants that looked like blue moss and flowers. They are so beautiful that I faint when I think of them. You—whose path turns the smooth surface of the Atlantic Ocean into tall waves, while deep below the surface sea-flowers and forests of seaweed, which have leaves with no sap, hear your voice and turn gray from fear, trembling, losing their flowers and leaves—listen to me, wind!

4.

If only I was a dead leaf, you might carry me. You might let me fly with you if I was a cloud. Or if I was a wave that you drive forward, I would share your strength—though I'd be less free than you, since no one can control you. If only I could be the way I was when I was a child, when I was your friend, wandering with you across the sky—then it didn't seem crazy to imagine that I could be as fast as you are—then I wouldn't have called out to you, prayed to you, in desperation. Please lift me up like a wave, a leaf, or a cloud! I am falling into life's sharp thorns and bleeding! Time has put me in shackles and diminished my pride, though I was once as proud, fast, and unruly as you.

5.

Make me into your musical instrument, just as the forest is when you blow through it. So what if my leaves are falling like the forest's leaves. The ruckus of your powerful music will bring a deep, autumn music out of both me and the forest. It will be beautiful even though it's sad. Unruly soul, you should become my soul. You should become me, you unpredictable creature. Scatter my dead thoughts across the universe like fallen leaves to inspire something new and exciting. Let this poem be a prayer that scatters ashes and sparks—as though from a fire that someone forgot to put out—throughout the human race. Speak through me, and in that way, turn my words into a prediction of the future. O wind, if winter is on its way, isn't Spring going to follow it soon?

THEMES

DEATH AND REBIRTH

Throughout "Ode to the West Wind," the speaker describes the West Wind as a powerful and destructive force: it drives away the summer and brings instead winter storms, chaos, and even death. Yet the speaker *celebrates* the West Wind and welcomes the destruction that it causes because it leads to renewal and rebirth.

The West Wind is not peaceful or pleasant. It is, the speaker notes, "the breath of Autumn's being." Autumn is a transitional season, when summer's abundance begins to fade. So too, everywhere the speaker looks the West Wind drives away peace and abundance. The West Wind strips the leaves from the trees, whips up the sky, and causes huge storms on the

ocean. And, in the first section of the poem, the speaker compares the dead leaves the West Wind blows to "ghosts" and "pestilence-stricken multitudes." The West Wind turns the fall colors into something scary, associated with sickness and death.

Similarly, the clouds in the poem's second section look like the "bright hair uplifted from the head / of some fierce Mænad." In Greek mythology, the Mænads were the female followers of Dionysus (the god of Wine). They were famous for their wild parties and their dancing, and are often portrayed with their hair askew. The West Wind thus makes the clouds wild and drunk. It creates chaos. Unlike its "sister of the Spring"—which spreads sweet smells and beautiful flowers—the speaker associates the West Wind with chaos and death.

Yet despite the destructive power of the West Wind the speaker celebrates it—because such destruction is necessary for rebirth. As the speaker notes at the end of the poem's first section, the West Wind is both a "destroyer" and "preserver." These are the traditional names of two Hindu gods, Shiva and Vishnu. Vishnu's role is to preserve the world; Shiva is supposed to destroy it. The West Wind combines these two opposite figures. As the speaker announces in the final lines—"O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"—the West Wind is able to merge these opposites because death is required for life, and winter for Spring. In order to have the beautiful renewal and rebirth that Spring promises, one needs the powerful, destructive force of the West Wind.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-14
- Between Lines 14-15
- Lines 15-28
- Between Lines 28-29
- Lines 29-42
- Between Lines 42-43
- Lines 43-56
- Between Lines 56-57
- Lines 57-70

POETRY AND REBIRTH

Throughout "Ode to the West Wind," the speaker praises and celebrates the West Wind's power—it is destructive, chaotic—and yet such destruction is necessary for rebirth and renewal. Indeed, the speaker so admires the wind that he wants to take, adopt, or absorb the West Wind's power's into his poetry.

The speaker describes himself as a diminished person: he is "chained and bowed." Far from condemning the destructive power of the wind, the speaker hopes the West Wind will revive him. At different points in the poem, the speaker has different ideas about what this might look like. Most simply, the wind simply becomes the speaker, or becomes part of him. "Be thou me," the speaker tells the wind.

But the speaker also proposes more complicated interactions between himself and the wind. At one point, he asks the Wind, to "make me thy lyre, even as the forest is." In other words he wants to be a musical instrument, specifically the lyre, the musical instrument that poets traditionally play while they perform their poems. In this scheme, the speaker helps the wind—he's like a musical accompaniment to it. The speaker doesn't take an active role, the wind does. (These roles are reinforced later when the speaker imagines the Wind "driv[ing] my dead thoughts over the universe"—it certainly seems that the Wind is doing the real work).

The speaker wants to *be* (or to help) the West Wind because he wants to create something new, to clear away the old and the dead. Under the West Wind's influence, his or her "dead thoughts" will "quicken a new birth"—they will create something living and new. The speaker doesn't say exactly what new thing he hopes to create. It might be a new kind of poetry. Or it might be a new society. (Indeed, many readers have interpreted the poem as a call for political change). Either way, for the speaker, that newness can't be achieved through compromise with the old and dead; it can emerge only through the cleansing destruction that the West Wind brings.

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LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,

The first line of "Ode to the West Wind" hints at the poem's themes and begins to establish its form. The speaker begins his poem by talking directly to the "West Wind." This is an instance of apostrophe: though the speaker addresses the wind, the wind's not exactly human—and perhaps not even capable of understanding what the speaker's saying, let alone responding to him.

This will be a major problem in the poem. As the poem progresses, the speaker will repeat this gesture, addressing the "West Wind," calling it "Thou," over and over (an instance of the poetic device anaphora). As the speaker does so, he begins to question—more and more insistently—whether apostrophe really works, whether it's actually possible to communicate with the natural world. This is an urgent question for the speaker: he not only admires and celebrates the West Wind, he also wants to share in its power.

In the poem's first line, the speaker says a couple of interesting things about the West Wind, things that anticipate the poem's broader themes. First, he calls it "wild." The West Wind seems out of control—or, at least, out of human control. It is undomesticated, untamed. The alliteration between "wild" and "West Wind" locks in this connection: it makes it seem like wildness is essential to the West Wind's character.

Then, in the second half of the line (after a caesura), the speaker calls the West Wind "the breath of Autumn's being." In other words, the West Wind is the very essence of Autumn, as intimate to it as breath. Autumn is a transitional season, when Summer's beauty and abundance begin to die out and the bleak Winter approaches. Already in this first line, the speaker suggests that the West Wind is key to that transition—that it is associated with death and decline. (Once again, alliteration—here between "breath" and "being"—locks in the association between the wind and autumn: they seem inseparable).

The first line also introduces the reader to the poem's form—and its formal irregularities. The poem is written in terza rima. Terza rima uses three-line stanzas, whose rhymes lock together. The first stanza of the poem is rhymed *ABA*, the next *BCB*, etc. Terza rima was most famously used by the Italian poet Dante, in his epic poem *The Divine Comedy*. The form is so closely linked to him that just using it already feels like an allusion to Dante and his epic, which describes the soul's descent into Hell and its subsequent ascent into Heaven. This just suggests that Shelley's poem will also track the soul's journey in some way.

To make matters even more complicated, Shelley arranges each section of the poem into fourteen lines—each section is in terza rima *and* is a sonnet, albeit an unusual and irregular sonnet. As with most English sonnets, the poem is written in iambic pentameter, but it takes a while to establish its meter: indeed, the first six lines of the poem are all metrically irregular. The first line, for instance, contains a spondee in its second foot, "West Wind"—which gives the line six stresses instead of the usual five. These metrical variations are intentional and important: they make the poem feel as a wild and energetic as the West Wind itself.

LINES 2-5

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:

In lines 2-5, the speaker expands his initial description of the West Wind. (Note that, in doing so, he repeats his initial way of addressing it: once again, he speaks directly to the West Wind, calling it "Thou"). In these lines, the speaker strengthens the wind's association with death and decay.

The speaker begins by describing the wind as an "unseen presence." In other words, it's invisible. But it still has a big effect on the world: it drives the "dead" leaves. This might be a beautiful, soothing sight: colorful, fallen leaves whirling in the breeze. But for the speaker, it's spooky and unsettling. He compares the leaves to "ghosts [...] fleeing" from "an enchanter." The simile makes the leaves into supernatural, scary spirits—and the wind becomes a powerful, magical figure, closely associated with the dead.

This simile is also an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*. In Canto III of the *Inferno*, as the speaker of Dante's poem enters Hell, he compares the dead souls waiting to be carried into Hell to dead leaves. Of course, Shelley's poem also uses Dante's signature form, terza rima. The poem is thus playing with Dante's legacy. This signals that the poem is intensely ambitious—*The Divine Comedy* (a three-book poem, of which the *Inferno* is the first book) is one of the most expansive and accomplished poems ever written.

But Shelley's poem doesn't just recapitulate Dante's triumph. It also changes some of Dante's ideas. Where Dante's world is organized and ruled by God, Shelley—who was famously an atheist—resists bringing God into things. His world is ruled by natural cycles of birth and decay, rather than by some divine presence.

In lines 4-5, the speaker switches things up and compares the dead leaves, with their many colors, to "pestilence-stricken multitudes." ("Hectic red," for instance, suggests the bright, flushed complexion of people suffering from tuberculosis.) In other words, they are like a sick population—not yet dead, but getting there. Both comparisons personify the leaves, turning them into human beings, dead or dying.

In these lines, the speaker continues the formal pattern established in the first line. The poem is in terza rima and iambic pentameter. But the speaker's pentameter is rough. Line 2 ends with a spondee, "leaves dead." Like the poem's first line it has six stresses instead of the usual five in a line of iambic pentameter. And line 3 has twelve syllables—two more than usual! This metrical irregularity continues throughout the poem.

The individual substitutions are less important than their overall effect. The poem's meter is intentionally wild—it models the energy of the West Wind, which cuts through all boundaries and restraints. The poem also imitates the sound of

the West Wind: the consonant and sibilant /s/ sound in words like "unseen," "presence" and "ghosts" in lines 2 and 3 imitates the sharp, whistling sound the Wind makes as it rushes through the world.

LINES 5-8

O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave,

Lines 5-8 pick up right where the previous 5 lines left off. Once again, the speaker is describing the West Wind; once again he addresses it directly, calling it "thou." And once again, the wind is associated with death and decay. Here, the speaker focuses on the way the West Wind blows seeds out of plants and trees and carries them down to the ground.

The speaker uses a weird word to describe this process, "chariotest," but all he means is that the West Wind carries the seeds as though they were in a chariot. The speaker describes the ground where they come to rest metaphorically as a "dark wintry bed," and he uses a simile to describe the seeds: they are each "like a corpse within its grave." This simile once again associates the West Wind with death and decay: here it is like a gravedigger. And this simile also personifies the seeds: they are like human bodies, corpses. The assonant /o/ sound in "cold" and "low" emphasizes the mournful, sad character of the scene the speaker describes: it sounds like a howling, cold wind.

The poem's formal pattern continues here: it's in terza rima written in lines of iambic pentameter. After the first 6 lines, all of which contain some kind of metrical substitution, it finally hits its stride; line 7 is perfectly regular:

The wing- | ed seeds, | where they | lie cold | and low.

But as the poem's meter straightens itself out, its rhymes start to lose their consistency: "thou" and "low" is a slant rhyme. It's almost as though the poem is resisting being perfectly regular. The poem bursts through its own boundaries; its form is as unruly and disobedient as the West Wind itself.

LINES 8-12

until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
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 speaker spends the first seven and a half lines of the poem describing the West Wind. He describes it as a force of death and decay. In lines 8-12, he switches things up. The seeds that the West Wind blows down will lie like "corpse[s]" until another wind arrives, the "Spring" wind.

In contrast to the West Wind, with its destructive force, the Spring wind is soothing and nurturing. Once it blows its trumpet, or "clarion," the seeds lying in the ground will wake up and fill the plains and hills with "living hues and odours." In other words, the Spring wind helps the flowers bud and blossom. It does so with care and concern: in line 11, the speaker describes the buds and flowers as the Spring wind's sheep, or "flocks." The "flocks" serve as a symbol for purity and innocence; the simile suggests that the Wind works with the gentle, careful stewardship of a shepherd guiding a flock to the field.

Because the seeds are like "corpse[s]," their rebirth in the Spring seems almost like a resurrection—the dead coming back to life. In another poem, this might be a Christian allusion, but Shelley once again refuses to make a connection to Christianity. He plays with Christian symbols and traditions, but in his world, such moments of resurrection are entirely natural—they don't require God's intervention.

The poem's formal pattern continues here—and it also becomes more regular. There are no slant rhymes here to interrupt the steady progress of its terza rima; though there are a few metrical substitutions, they are not nearly as notable or disruptive as those in the first six lines. This sudden regularity is fitting: the speaker is no longer describing the chaotic, violent West Wind. As he turns to describe the Spring wind, his poem takes on its soothing regularity.

The assonant /o/ sound from line 7—"cold" and "low"—reappears in line 9, "blow." In line 7, the sound is mournful and sad; here it is reassuring, even triumphant: it signals the return of life. The use of assonance in lines 7 and 9 thus gets at the poem's core point. The seeds only sprout in the Spring because the West Wind knocked them loose. Its destructive power makes rebirth possible. The assonance suggests the essential argument of the poem: that destruction is necessary for renewal.

LINES 13-14

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

In the last two lines of the first section of "Ode to the West Wind," the speaker returns to describing the West Wind. He describes it as "moving everywhere"—which gives the reader a sense that the West Wind is powerful, destructive, and omnipresent: there's no part of the world that isn't subject to its power.

In line 14, however, the speaker notes that the Wind's power is ambiguous, even contradictory. He describes it as "destroyer and preserver." This description alludes to the traditional names of two Hindu gods, Shiva and Vishnu. Vishnu is traditionally tasked with preserving the world; Shiva with destroying it. The West Wind combines these two contradictory tasks, binding together two gods who are usually understood to be at odds with each other. It takes a while for the speaker to fully explain why and how the West Wind manages to combine these two

contradictory functions. But the poem has already hinted at the eventual solution: the destruction that the West Wind brings is necessary to preserve the world.

Section I ends with the speaker directly addressing the West Wind: "hear, oh hear!" he says. The phrase is separated from the rest of the line by a caesura, which emphasizes it. This phrase becomes a refrain for the poem: a version of it appears at the end of each of the first three sections. It emphasizes, once again, that the entire poem is an instance of apostrophe: the speaker is talking *to* the wind throughout, or trying to. Its repetition suggests that the speaker is a little nervous about his relationship with the wind. He isn't entirely sure that it's listening to him, so he has to keep asking it to listen to him.

Lines 13-14 are a rhyming couplet. Such a couplet marks the end of terza rima: terza rima is a series of tercets rhymed *ABA BCB*, etc. The form extends indefinitely—one can have an infinite number of such three-line stanzas. But the poem always closes with a rhyming couplet. However, here the rhyme is off: "everywhere" and "hear" is a slant rhyme. As soon as the speaker returns to describing the West Wind, the soothing formal regularity of the previous lines disappears and the poem becomes ragged and wild again—as wild as the West Wind itself.

Since this terza rima section is fourteen lines long, it can also be described as a sonnet, albeit an unusual one. This sonnet doesn't follow the rhyme scheme of either a Petrarchan or a Shakespearean sonnet. However, with its closing rhyming couplet, it comes close to resembling a Shakespearean sonnet. As in a Shakespearean sonnet, this couplet functions as a kind of summing up of everything the poem has said.

LINES 15-18

> *T*
> *hou 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:*

The speaker starts the second section of "Ode to the West Wind" in much the same way he started its first section. He directly addresses the West Wind, calling it "Thou" (and in that way extends the anaphora of the previous section). So, the poem remains an apostrophe: the speaker is talking to the West Wind as if it were a person. In the second section of the poem, the speaker continues to describe the Wind. However, the speaker switches things up here. In the first section, he focuses on the effect that the wind has on leaves and plants; in this section he focuses on the sky.

In lines 15-17, the speaker describes the clouds that the wind whips across the sky. Recalling the simile the speaker introduced in lines 2-3, he describes the clouds as being like "decaying leaves." This simile again alludes to a famous passage from Dante, where Dante compares the souls of the dead to fallen leaves. Here, the clouds seem ghostly, spectral, like dead spirits. This simile and allusion thus bundles three images into one: clouds, leaves, and ghosts.

The speaker extends this simile into line 17. If the clouds are like dead leaves, they fell from the "boughs"—that is, the branches—of "Heaven and Ocean." In other words, the earth and the sky are like trees and the clouds are the leaves shaken loose from those trees.

The simile is complex, multilayered, and the speaker makes it even more complicated in line 18, where he adds in a metaphor: the clouds are like "angels" full of "rain and lightning." This is the most explicitly Christian reference in the poem, since angels are an important part of Christianity. But the speaker makes the angels seem strange, less Christian, by filling them up with rain and lightning. Further, the metaphor helps clarify what kind of clouds the speaker is describing. They're not whispy horsetails, but big, threatening storm clouds.

In these lines, the poem's form re-commences: after the terza rima of the first section ends, the second section starts it up again. The meter continues to be rough and irregular iambic pentameter. Line 17, for example, is another 12 syllable line: it has a full extra foot beyond what one normally finds in iambic pentameter. The return to the previous section's form establishes a pattern that will hold for the rest of the poem: each section will be fourteen lines long, a combined terza rima sonnet. The poem thus feels like a miniature sonnet sequence, along the lines of Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* or Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Each section is discrete and yet they add up to something greater than the sum of their parts.

LINES 18-23

> *there are spread*
> *On the blue surface of thine aëry 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.*

In lines 18-23, the speaker continues to describe the sky and the clouds that the West Wind whips across it. The speaker compares these clouds, metaphorically, to hair, calling them "locks."

And not just any hair: using a simile, he compares them to the "bright hair" of "some fierce Maenad." The Maenads were the female followers of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. The line alludes to the wild dancing and parties that the Maenads engaged in. (In painting and sculpture, they are often portrayed with their hair scattered from the frenzy of their dance). In other words, the clouds look wild. The West Wind has whipped them into chaotic formations. Moreover, these wild formations stretch from the horizon—the sky's "dim verge"—to its highest heights, its "zenith." The whole sky is full of these wild clouds.

The allusion to the Maenads is the third in the poem. Strikingly, each allusion comes from a different culture and religion—from Christianity, with the allusion to Dante in lines 2-3; from Hinduism, with the reference to Shiva and Vishnu in line 14; and here, from Greek myth. The speaker draws on resources from many cultures. This, in turn, emphasizes that the West Wind works its destruction across the world; it is not specific to a particular culture or setting.

The sentence that stretches through these lines is complicated and potentially hard to follow. But if one rearranges the lines a bit, its structure becomes clearer. "The locks of the approaching storm," in line 23, is actually the sentence's subject, even though it comes at the end. The sentence would read more clearly if it were rewritten as "The locks of the approaching storm are spread on the blue surface…" The speaker chooses this convoluted syntax because it mimics the West Wind itself, the way it rushes chaotically around. Reading this long, complicated sentence almost feels like being buffeted by unpredictable gusts of wind.

This sense is enhanced by the enjambments that run through this passage. Because the subject of the sentence is delayed for so long, none of the lines are grammatically complete: the reader races through them, looking for the point where the grammar of these lines comes together, reaching an end-stop or a period.

Otherwise, these lines follow the poem's general formal pattern: they are written in iambic pentameter, sometimes a little rough around the edges, and organized as terza rima. The meter is more regular here than elsewhere, as if to compensate for the complicated, twisting syntax.

LINES 23-28

Thou dirge
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!

In lines 23-28, the speaker continues to describe the West Wind and the clouds that it whips across the sky. The speaker begins with a metaphor, comparing the wind to a "dirge"—as though the wind were a sad, mournful song. Then in lines 24-28, the speaker switches metaphors. Night is falling. To the speaker the darkening sky looks like the domed roof of a large tomb or "sepulchre."

Then the speaker introduces a *third* metaphor that depends on the comparison between the night sky and the roof of a burial vault. The clouds that stretch across the sky—or, as the speaker puts it, "thy congregated might / of vapours"—look like the ribs or archways that run across the inside of the dome, supporting it.

The section ends with the speaker imaging a wild storm, with "black rain, and fire, and hail." The image is apocalyptic: it seems like the world is ending. This final image thus returns the reader to the powerful and violent force of the West Wind. Indeed, it is so powerful that it seems like it will bring about the end of the world.

Finally, the speaker returns to the refrain from the first section: "Oh hear!" As in the first section, it's separated by a caesura from the rest of the line. The speaker almost seems to be checking in, making sure the West Wind is listening to him, as if he's suddenly worried that the wind *isn't* listening. As the speaker repeats the refrain, the anxiety it contains amplifies: the speaker seems more and more worried that apostrophe isn't working, that he can't actually communicate with the West Wind.

The second section ends in the same way the first did: the terza rima wraps up with a final rhyming couplet. Also like the previous section, this section is fourteen lines—so it's both terza rima *and* a sonnet. And like much of the rest of the poem, these lines are full of formal irregularities, like the anapest in the first foot of line 24, "Of the dy-", or the slant rhyme between "sepulchre" and "atmosphere." The poem retains the same wildness it has exhibited throughout, a wildness which mimics the energy of the West Wind itself.

This wild energy also manifests in the way the poem uses end-stops. For instance, line 25 is technically an end-stopped line. In the somewhat strained grammar of the poem, line 25 counts as the completion of a grammatical unit. The sentence could end here. But it doesn't: instead, the speaker extends the sentence and the metaphor. So, this line could be interpreted as either an end-stop or an enjambment—or even, paradoxically, both. In this way, the poem mimics the West Wind's energy, rushing past the boundaries and borders within the poem itself.

LINES 29-32

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,
Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,

In the first section of the poem, the speaker describes how the West Wind drives dead leaves. In the second, he describes how it whips up storm clouds. In the third, he turns to the ocean, describing how the wind stirs enormous waves. The poem thus surveys the whole world, all of its environments—and shows how, wherever one turns, the West Wind causes destruction and chaos.

The speaker begins the third section in the same way he began the last two: addressing the West Wind directly, calling it "Thou." Beginning the section in this way—returning to the anaphora that has stretched through the poem so far—the speaker reminds the reader that he is talking *to* the Wind: he's using apostrophe. After addressing the Wind, though, the

speaker abruptly shifts focus. Instead of talking about the wind, he talks about the "blue Mediterranean"—the balmy, calmer sea that separates Africa and Europe. The speaker personifies the Mediterranean, describing it as asleep, full of "summer dreams" next to a volcanic island in the bay of Baiae (an actual bay near Naples, Italy). As the speaker describes the Mediterranean, it's curled up in its currents, "coil[ed]" in "his crystalline streams." The consonant /l/ sound that runs through lines 30-31—for, example, in "lay," "lull'd," "coil," and "crystalline"—is calm and lulling; it mimics the sleepy feel of the Mediterranean. Predictably, the West Wind, the force of chaos and violence, doesn't let the Mediterranean continue to sleep. Rather, the wind wakes it up.

The third section returns to the form of the previous two sections: like them, it's a terza rima, written in iambic pentameter. These lines are more regular, less rough, than most of the rest of the poem. That's fitting. The speaker isn't describing the West Wind here, with its violent force. Instead, he's talking about the calm, tranquil Mediterranean. As he does so, the poem finds an equivalent calm, a kind of formal tranquility.

LINES 33-36

And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,
All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them!

In lines 33-36, the speaker continues to describe the "blue Mediterranean," focusing on what the Mediterranean sees in its dreams. It sees the ruins of "old palaces and towers" under the water of the bay. The speaker places the "blue Mediterranean" in a specific spot—the Bay of Baiae, outside Naples, Italy—where there are actual palaces and towers submerged in the bay. But more generally, the "old palaces and towers" mentioned here are a symbol: a symbol of the past, with its majestic, imposing accomplishments. The blue Mediterranean seems transfixed by this past. And for understandable reasons. As the speaker describes them, these "old palaces and towers" are almost painfully beautiful: with flowers and bright blue moss growing on them. Indeed, the speaker says, that the image us all so "sweet" that one almost "faints" just "picturing" or imagining them.

These lines provide a moment of calm and respite, away from the violence and chaos of the West Wind. And, formally, they are equally calm: their rhymes fall easily into the rhyme scheme of the terza rima. The meter is a bit wobbly, with an extra unstressed syllable (known as a "feminine ending") added to lines 33 and 35 and a dactyl rather than an iamb making up the first foot of line 34, "quivering," but these metrical substitutions are relatively normal and don't disrupt the poem in the way they do elsewhere. The poem's form echoes the tranquility it describes.

LINES 36-42

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

As the third section of "Ode to the West Wind" opens, the speaker describes the "blue Mediterranean" dreaming sweet and peaceful dreams about beautiful old towers and palaces—symbols of the triumphs of the past. The speaker allows the reader to linger with this peaceful, tranquil vision for a bit—but not long. Soon enough, the West Wind reenters the poem, with all its violent force. This change is marked in line 36, with a return to the anaphora and apostrophe that has structured the poem so far: "Thou," the speaker proclaims at the end of the line, once again directly addressing the West Wind. In the lines that follow, the speaker focuses on how the West Wind stirs up huge waves. In lines 36-38, the speaker describes the West Wind transforming the Atlantic Ocean: its "level powers" churning into deep "chasms." These waves are so powerful that the seaweed and other underwater plants shed their leaves in fear as soon as they hear the West Wind coming.

The West Wind not only disturbs the "blue Mediterranean" and its peaceful sleep; it not only knocks loose the leaves of underwater plants. It also, implicitly, breaks the reflections of the "old palaces and towers" that the Mediterranean gazes upon during its sleep. Since these "old palaces and towers" are symbols of the past, one might say that the West Wind—as it brings on destruction and decay—also sweeps away the past, and the societal order that the past represents. This is the first hint, a subtle hint, that the poem may be as interested in politics as it is in the wind itself.

The third section of the poem ends in the same way that the previous two sections have ended: line 42 is divided by a caesura, after which the poem's refrain—sounding more and more anxious, more and more desperate, appears again: "O hear!" By now, the speaker's repeated requests, his demands that the wind listen to him, seem to betray a deep uncertainty about his relationship with the wind—and, perhaps, his relationship with nature more broadly. The poem calls into question whether human beings can communicate with nature at all, even as the poem's form often imitates the natural phenomenon it describes—the placidity of the "blue Mediterranean" or, in the case of lines 36-42, the wildness of the West Wind. Though the poem fulfills the expectations of its form, the terza rima, and ends with a rhyming couplet, there are wrinkles in the form throughout lines 36-42, such as the slant rhyme between "wear" and "fear" in lines 39 and 41, or the trochee in the second foot of line 39: "the sea- | blooms and…" The poem continues to use its form to register the violence and

chaos of the West Wind.

LINES 43-47

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
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable!

The speaker spends the first three sections of "Ode to the West Wind" describing the wind's violent, chaotic effects on land, sea, and sky. In the fourth section, he suddenly changes focus and starts talking about himself. And he says a series of surprising things about himself. Even though he's spent the last 40-odd lines describing how destructive the wind is, the speaker wants to "share / the impulse of thy strength." He doesn't want to run away from the West Wind: he wants to have some of its power. He wants to be one of the things that the West Wind stirs up: to be borne by it like a "dead leaf," to be driven by it like "swift cloud," to be driven by it like "a wave."

The parallel structure of lines 43 and 44—both beginning with "If I were..."—underlines the force of the speaker's desire, the urgency with which he wants the wind's help. And the end-stops that punctuate lines 43-44 underscore how definite the speaker is about his desire, how resolved. (These end-stops also alter the poem's formal pattern: the poem has, until this point, been very enjambed). And in lines 46-47, the speaker begins to suggest why he wants the wind's help: he is "less free" than it—indeed, it is entirely "uncontrollable." He wants to taste some of the wind's freedom alongside its power.

The fourth section follows the formal pattern established in the previous three sections: it too is a terza rima sonnet. The poem's meter is a bit more regular here. Except for a fairly unobtrusive anapest in the final foot of line 45, "-er and share," these lines are as metrically regular iambic pentameter as any in the poem. The speaker's lack of freedom is felt in the sudden strictness of the form.

Although the form of the poem is unchanged in this fourth section, some of the poetic devices the speaker has used throughout the poem change their function as the poem's subject changes. For instance, take a look at the alliteration in line 45: "pant" and "power." The /p/ sound in the line underlines the relationship between the wind and the speaker: it pushes him to the limits of his abilities and causes him to "pant." In previous sections—recall the alliterations in the poem's first line—the speaker used alliteration to characterize the West Wind. Here it characterizes the speaker himself, his desires. This a good lesson for thinking more broadly about the poem's devices: they often mean different things in different places, shifting as the poem's priorities shift.

LINES 47-51

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;

In lines 47, the speaker continues to describe his desires. Maybe he can't be as free as the West Wind, or be driven by it like a leave, a cloud, or a wave. But perhaps he could be like he was as a boy: the West Wind's "comrade" as it wanders across the sky. When he was a boy, the speaker says, it didn't seem impossible to him that he could run faster that the West Wind—he would "outstrip" its "skiey speed." For the speaker, childhood was a space of freedom and possibility—which he, evidently, no longer enjoys. These lines thus fill the poem with a sense of nostalgia: the speaker is mourning his lost youth and its freedoms.

The poem's form shows some signs of the speaker's frustration and disappointment. It continues to be in fairly good iambic pentameter (though with the extra unstressed syllable of feminine endings in lines 47, 49, and 51). But the rhymes exhibit some stress. "Even" and "Heaven" are slant rhymes. The failure to find a rhyme that matches "Heaven" suggests that the speaker's dreams and aspirations have fallen short, that he can't reach the ideal freedom and power he seeks. And "be" and "speed" are assonant rhymes—their vowel sounds match, but they don't actually rhyme. Once again, the failure of the rhyme suggests that the speaker can't "be" the "speed" that he seeks, that he has fallen short of the West Wind as an ideal. In this sense, the poem's form registers the speaker's sense of nostalgia and disappointment.

LINES 51-56

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

In lines 47-51, the speaker imagines being a boy, running with the West Wind as its "comrade." In lines 51-2, the speaker describes how his life would be different if he still felt that sense of freedom and possibility: he would never have "striven / as thus with thee in prayer in my sore need." In other words, he wouldn't have asked the West Wind for its help. The word "prayer" is interesting: it recalls other moments where the poem makes reference to religion. If this is a "prayer," though, it's a blasphemous one: the speaker isn't asking God for help, but rather the West Wind, a natural force. Once again, the speaker flirts with religion, only to refuse it, or to reveal a closer connection with nature than with the Christian or any other god.

In lines 53-6, the speaker returns to his "prayer." Using a simile, he once again asks the wind to "lift" him like a "wave, a leaf, a

cloud." And he underlines his desperation: "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" The speaker isn't literally falling on any thorns or bleeding. Instead, these function as symbols (or metaphors—one can describe them either way) for the obstacles and challenges (the "thorns" he faces in his life—and for the way that those challenges have robbed him of his potential, his very essence (his "blood").

Indeed, he now says that though he was once "one too like thee"—a person free and untamed, like the wind—he is no longer. He has been "chain'd and bow'd": time and the various limits of human life have diminished and constrained him. The speaker appeals to the wind to help him restore some of his own lost freedom and possibility. Note, though, that as the speaker makes this plea, he abandons the poem's refrain. At the end of each of the poem's previous three sections, the speaker had commanded: "O hear!" The speaker seems more daring here, willing to bet that the wind *will* listen to him, even if he doesn't check in regularly.

These lines are formally regular: strong terza rima, with good rhymes and—mostly—unblemished iambic pentameter. The speaker is reflecting on his own sense of being constrained, diminished. The form reflects it: he's following the rules here, coloring within the lines. There is one striking metrical substation: the trochee in the third foot of line 56, "tame**less**." When the speaker reflects on being "tameless," the poem suddenly and briefly comes alive, breaks the structural constraints under which it's been laboring.

LINES 57-61

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.

In the fifth section of "Ode to the West Wind," the speaker continues to directly address the West Wind, asking it for help. In the previous section, he has described himself as a constrained and diminished person, "chain'd and bow'd." He hopes the West Wind will help him recover some of his lost freedom and possibility. In the fifth section, he proposes two—very different—ways that the West Wind might help him. In lines 57-61, he advances one possibility. He wants the West Wind to make him "thy lyre." A lyre is a small, hand-held harp: in ancient Greece, poets strummed the instrument as they performed, using it to provide musical accompaniment for their poems. The lyre is thus often symbolic of poetry itself. It symbolizes poetry in this poem too—but in a strange way. The speaker doesn't want to play the lyre. He wants to *be* the lyre. In other words, the *wind* is the real poet here, and the speaker wants simply to accompany and support it.

After the caesura created by the comma in line 57, the speaker uses a simile to suggest that the wind already is a poet: it uses the "forest" as a lyre. In other words, the sound of the wind rushing through the forest is a kind of poetry or music. Indeed, the speaker describes the sounds the wind makes as "mighty harmonies." He's happy to have it blow through him with the same force and violence as it blows through the forest, regardless of the cost: so what, he asks, "if my leaves are falling like its own!" The speaker believes that it would be worth it because the wind will make beautiful music, "a deep, autumnal tone, / Sweet though in sadness." In these lines, the speaker imagines taking a passive role. Indeed, the speaker says that the wind will "take *from* both" himself and the forest the "deep, autumnal tone." He doesn't produce anything or even really participate. The wind simply applies its violence to him, much as it did to the leaves, clouds, and waves, earlier in the poem.

Section 5 follows the same formal pattern as the previous sections: it is a terza rima written in iambic pentameter. As fits the poem's general structural pattern, there are some telling formal irregularities in these lines. For example, "forest is" and "harmonies" hardly form a rhyme at all—at best, they can be called a slant rhyme. The failed rhyme emphasizes the difference between the wind and the things it affects: the harmonies are too majestic to rhyme with something as boring and ordinary as a forest! And the meter continues to be rough around the edges. Line 57, for example, has an extra syllable. (Experts might disagree as to how line 57 might be broken down into metrical feet, but the most common reading is that the line has an anapest rather than an iamb in its final foot: "forest **is**".) The poem continues to register in its form the disruptive power of the West Wind.

LINES 61-64

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!

In lines 57-61, the speaker wants to be the West Wind's "lyre": passively accompanying the wind as it produces its magnificent, violent music. In lines 61-62, the speaker proposes a different kind of relationship between himself and the wind: he wants the wind to be "[his] spirit." Indeed, he wants it to *be* him: "Be thou me, impetuous one!" Instead of passively accompanying the wind, he wants to become the wind (or for the wind to become him), to take on its full power.

Some formal details in these lines reveal that the speaker is still far from this goal. For instance, the enjambment at the end of line 61 separates the Spirit fierce"—the speaker's name for the West Wind at the moment—from "My Spirit" (i.e. from the speaker himself). Similarly, the comma that creates the second caesura in the middle of line 62, "Be thou me, impetuous one!" once again emphasizes the difference between the speaker and the wind, even as the speaker asks the wind to become him. The speaker may want to *be* the wind, but he isn't there yet—or

even close. The parallel structure of the two commands in lines 61-2, however, emphasize the force of the speaker's desire—how much he wants to have this happen.

No sooner does the speaker express this desire, to be the wind, than in lines 63-4, he returns to his previous desire: he wants the wind to:

> Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
> Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!

Using a simile, the speaker here compares his "dead thoughts" to the wither'd leaves that the wind blows around (and in doing so, he recalls the allusion in lines 2-3 to Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, who uses a similar simile when describing the souls of the dead: he says they are like fallen leaves). And the speaker wants the wind to do the heavy lifting, sending his thoughts out into the word so that they can generate something new, can "quicken a new birth!" This request returns the reader to the paradox at the heart of the poem: the West Wind is both a "destroyer" and a "preserver." By scattering the speaker's "dead thoughts," the wind will create something new, a "new birth."

The form of these lines continues the poem's pattern: terza rima written in iambic pentameter. The meter is relatively smooth here, with the occasional blemish, like the spondee replacing the expected iamb in the second foot of "dead thoughts" in line 63. The rhyme in these lines, however, is less regular. While "universe" and "verse" in lines 63 and 65 rhyme as expected, "fierce" in line 61 does not. It is at best a slant rhyme. Once again, the speaker's description of the West Wind fails to rhyme with his description of the world, the "universe." The slant rhyme thus emphasizes how unique the West Wind is, how different from the speaker and the world in which he lives.

LINES 65-70

> *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,*
> *If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*

As "Ode to the West Wind" comes to a close, it returns to its central theme, its core argument: that the West Wind's destructive power is actually necessary, and even healthy. The speaker makes clear that the destruction brought about by the West Wind helps bring about renewal and rebirth—in fact, the speaker goes further and suggests that such renewal is impossible without the West Wind. In previous sections of the poem, the speaker has treated this as a natural cycle: Spring follows Winter—and, in a sense, requires it. In lines 65-70, the speaker returns to these natural cycles, asking "O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" However, in these lines the speaker suggests that this *natural* cycle is also a metaphor for a different kind of rebirth and renewal—a *political* renewal, perhaps.

He hopes that the performance of his poem—"the incantation of this verse"—will "scatter" his "words among mankind" like "ashes and sparks" from "an unextinguished hearth." In other words, he hopes his words will start a metaphorical fire in the human race—inspiring them to make changes, to try new things. Further, he hopes that his words will be "the trumpet of a prophecy"—that the words will predict the future. The word "prophecy"—like "prayer" in line 52—comes from a religious context. And it helps to suggest what kind of renewal and rebirth the speaker is hoping for, even though he never explicitly tells the reader what he hopes to see. In the Bible, the prophets are frequently highly critical of their society, exposing its hypocrisies and failures of faith—and threatening punishment for those failures. If the speaker hopes to make his poem a "prophecy," then perhaps he hopes his poem will produce a similar critique of society, a similarly forceful call for radical change. In this sense, it seems that the poem is a call for political upheaval, for revolutionary change.

These lines are among the most regular in the poem: with consistent iambic pentameter and strong rhymes, arranged in the expected pattern of a terza rima. Earlier in the poem, such formal regularity has suggested constraint and limitation. In these concluding lines of the poem, though, it suggests confidence: the speaker has come into his own: he is expressing his desires forcefully, without reservation. The poem ends triumphantly after all its hope and doubt.

SYMBOLS

SEEDS

In lines 6-7, the speaker describes how the West Wind carries "winged seeds" to their "dark wintry bed." In other words, the wind knocks loose seeds from the plants holding them, and carries the seeds to the ground, where they lie all winter. This is something that really happens in the fall—and the speaker is, partially, describing literal seeds involved in an actual natural process.

But the seeds also play a symbolic role in the poem. They symbolize the possibility of rebirth and renewal. As the speaker notes in the next few lines, as soon as spring comes, the seeds sprout, producing "sweet buds" and "living hues and odours." If the seeds are like "corpse[s]" in their "grave[s]," then their rebirth in the Spring is something like resurrection. (Shelley was, famously, an atheist, and so this image of resurrection is notably secular: instead of involving God, he portrays it as an entirely natural process). For all its destructive power, the West Wind plays an important role in bringing about that rebirth and

renewal: without it, the seeds would never get to the ground and start growing. In this way, the West Wind earns the title the speaker gives it later in the poem: it *is* both a "destroyer" and a "preserver."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "seeds"

FLOCKS

In line 11, the speaker describes the Spring wind "driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air." In other words, the wind is like a shepherd; it helps bring out the buds of flowers in the same way a shepherd drives their sheep, their "flocks," to pasture.

This simile is already pretty complicated, and it's made even more so by the symbol in the middle of it, the "flocks." "Flocks" of sheep are a traditional symbol in poetry for innocence and beauty. In pastoral poetry—a whole genre of poetry dedicated to talking about shepherds and sheep—the presence of the "flock" often suggests that the shepherd is free from politics and all the dirt and complication of life in the city. In this sense, the "flocks" suggest an important contrast with the speaker's characterization of the West Wind, which is so closely associated with death, violence, and chaos. As a symbol, the "flocks" suggest a world where such negative things are of no concern, because it is so pure, innocent, and beautiful.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "flocks"

OLD PALACES AND TOWERS

In line 33, the speaker describes the "blue Mediterranean" asleep, dreaming of "old palaces and towers." The speaker is careful to place this dream vision in a specific place, the Bay of Baiae near Naples, in Italy. And so the speaker may have specific buildings in Naples in mind, buildings he wants the reader to see in their mind.

But the "old palaces and towers" also take on a symbolic significance in the line. They symbolize the past itself—history—the glorious accomplishment of previous generations. The personified "Blue Mediterranean" looks at these symbols of the past with comfort and complacency: he doesn't feel any need to challenge or change them. It seems likely, though, that the West Wind might feel differently. (Indeed, the speaker brings the "blue Mediterranean" into the poem in order to draw a contrast between it and the violence and energy of the West Wind). The symbol thus gives the reader a quiet, implicit hint: part of what the speaker hopes the West Wind will destroy is the past, in order to make space for a new society to emerge.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "old palaces and towers"

THORNS OF LIFE

When the speaker complains about falling on the "thorns of life" in line 54, he isn't talking about literal thorns. Instead, the thorns are symbols—symbols for the difficulties that one faces in life: perhaps pain, disappointment, or aging. The speaker doesn't specify what, exactly, he's struggling with—what precise forces or feelings have limited his capacities and creative powers. What matters, instead, is simply that the speaker *does* feel limited and diminished, like he has lost something important about himself—something the West Wind would help him regain. The "thorns of life" are thus a very vague, general symbol: they stand for the difficulties that the speaker faces in general, without embodying a particular or specific problem or disappointment.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 54:** "thorns of life"

BLOOD

In line 54, the speaker uses the "thorns of life" as a symbol for the troubles and difficulties that he faces in his life—without specifying what, exactly, he's struggling with. He ends the same line with another symbol: "I bleed," he exclaims. Here, the blood that the speaker bleeds serves as a symbol for his disappointment and diminishment. He feels like he has lost something essential, important—he is less powerful and creative than he once was. The blood symbolizes this lost power, this lost aspect of his own personality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 54:** "bleed"

LYRE

In line 57, the speaker expresses a strange desire: he wants the West Wind to "make [him its] lyre." A lyre is a small hand-held harp. In ancient Greece, poets would play the lyre as they performed their poems. As a result the lyre often serves as a symbol for poetry itself. It does that here: it symbolizes poetry.

But the way the symbol is used in the poem suggests that the speaker has an unusual relationship with poetry. The speaker doesn't want to *play* the lyre, he wants to *be* the lyre, the instrument that the poet plays—in which case, the West Wind

itself would be the poet. In other words, the poet is not asking the wind for inspiration or for it to make him into a poet. He wants to be in a more subservient position—he wants to *accompany* the wind, to help make *the wind's* poem sound sweeter.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 57:** "lyre"

ASHES AND SPARKS

In lines 66-7, the speaker asks the West Wind to scatter his "words" like "ashes and sparks…among mankind." The "ashes and sparks" are symbolic—the speaker doesn't want to start a literal fire. Instead, he wants his words to serve as inspiration and encouragement, which will help people break free from the oppression they currently endure. (The speaker never explicitly says what he wants to see change—but it seems to be something political). The "ashes and sparks" are thus symbols for the beginning of change, the start of a revolution, the opening of something radically new.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 67:** "Ashes and sparks"

SPRING

Throughout the poem, the West Wind has been a force of destruction and death. But the speaker has celebrated its power. In the last line, it becomes clear why. The speaker wants renewal and rebirth, a transformation of society. And the wind helps to bring about that rebirth, by sweeping away everything that has grown tired, old, and oppressive. In this sense, it is like "Winter." And the renewal that it promises to help bring about is like "Spring."

Spring, in the last line of the poem (and also in line 9), is thus a symbol for renewal and rebirth—the emergence of something radically new. This symbol is at the heart of the poem, the thing it wants to see happen. The poem is an "Ode" to the West Wind because the West Wind, with all its destructive force, is necessary to make this symbol real.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Spring"
- **Line 70:** "Spring"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

In its first three sections, "Ode to the West Wind" uses mostly weak end-stops—end-stops that barely register as end-stops. The speaker's sentences are so long that there are places where it feels like the sentence is coming to a close, that things are finished, wrapping up—but then the sentence keeps going, spilling forward into the next line.

There's a good example of this in the sentence that starts in line 23, "Thou dirge / of the dying year …" At the end of line 25, the sentence feels more or less grammatically complete. The speaker has called the wind a "dirge" and uses a metaphor to add that night-fall will be like the dome of a "vast sepulchre" hanging over it. (In other words, the night looks like the dome of a big tomb). The reader might reasonably expect the speaker to then move on and say something new about the wind. Instead, in the next line, line 26, the speaker continues to develop the same metaphor—he adds that the tomb is "vaulted" with "all thy congregated might / of vapours."

That is, the night sky has clouds running across it and those clouds look like the ribs or arches on the inside of the dome. Line 25 is *technically* end-stopped, but because the sentence spills past that end-stop, it doesn't feel that way—and so it doesn't really function as an end-stop: it doesn't introduce the kind of separation between lines that a stronger end-stop would. The poem is so energetic that it simply speeds past boundaries like these. Most of the end-stops in the poem's first three sections work in a similar way: they are technically end-stops, but they don't feel like it. This gives the poem a lot of velocity and energy. Like the wind it describes, it seems to break through all the limitations placed upon it.

In the poem's final two sections, though, the speaker does start to use end-stops with more strength and conviction—particularly in lines in which the speaker describes himself. Lines 43, 44, 53, and 54 all follow this pattern. Look, for example, at line 43: "If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear." The line is grammatically complete and cut off from the next line, "If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee"—which is also a complete, independent unit. These end-stops emphasize the speaker's isolation—he wants to be the wind's "comrade," to travel with it across the earth. But he can't. He is isolated, complete on his own—much like the lines that describe him.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "being,"
- **Line 3:** "fleeing,"
- **Line 4:** "red,"
- **Line 5:** "thou, "
- **Line 7:** "low,"

- **Line 11:** "air)"
- **Line 12:** "hill:"
- **Line 13:** "everywhere;"
- **Line 14:** "hear!"
- **Line 15:** "commotion, "
- **Line 16:** "shed,"
- **Line 17:** "Ocean,"
- **Line 19:** "surge, "
- **Line 22:** "height, "
- **Line 25:** "sepulchre, "
- **Line 28:** "hear!"
- **Line 30:** "lay,"
- **Line 31:** "streams,"
- **Line 32:** "bay, "
- **Line 34:** "day,"
- **Line 41:** "fear, "
- **Line 42:** "hear!"
- **Line 43:** "bear;"
- **Line 44:** "thee; "
- **Line 49:** "Heaven,"
- **Line 52:** "need."
- **Line 53:** "cloud!"
- **Line 54:** "bleed! "
- **Line 56:** "proud."
- **Line 57:** "is:"
- **Line 58:** "own!"
- **Line 60:** "tone,"
- **Line 61:** "fierce, "
- **Line 62:** "one!"
- **Line 64:** "birth!"
- **Line 65:** "verse, "
- **Line 67:** "mankind!"
- **Line 69:** "Wind, "
- **Line 70:** "behind?"

ENJAMBMENT

"Ode to the West Wind" is not just a poem about wind—it also takes on some of the wind's characteristics. Like the wind it describes, the poem is chaotic and energetic: it bursts through the boundaries of meter; its rhymes are often rough and irregular. This chaos and energy are reflected in the way that the poem uses enjambment and end-stop too. The poem has a lot of enjambments in it, especially in its first 3 sections. As its sentences stretch across line breaks and stanza breaks, it feels like the wind, rushing chaotically across the earth: the poem is just as resistant to boundaries and limits as the wind itself.

A good example of this occurs in the poem's second section. In line 18, the speaker announces, "there are spread…" But he doesn't clarify *what* is spread until line 23: "the locks of the approaching storm." The verb "are spread" is separated from its subject by a full five lines. The speaker spends those lines describing the sky. He compares "the locks of the approaching storm" to the hair of wild, dancing women. But all of these descriptions feel incomplete, because the reader doesn't know what they refer to, what the speaker is actually talking about. The enjambments are sustained for so long, and the speaker delays so long to give the key information in the sentence, that the reader feels disoriented, confused—it gets hard to even understand what the sentence is about. It's as though the sentence is a powerful gust of wind, that rushes around chaotically and knocks the reader off balance.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "dead / Are"
- **Lines 6-7:** "bed / The"
- **Lines 8-9:** "until / Thine"
- **Lines 9-10:** "blow / Her"
- **Lines 10-11:** "fill / (Driving"
- **Lines 15-16:** "commotion, / Loose"
- **Lines 18-19:** "spread / On"
- **Lines 19-20:** "surge, / Like"
- **Lines 20-21:** "head / Of"
- **Lines 21-22:** "verge / Of"
- **Lines 22-23:** "height, / The"
- **Lines 23-24:** "dirge / Of"
- **Lines 24-25:** "night / Will"
- **Lines 26-27:** "might / Of"
- **Lines 27-28:** "atmosphere / Black"
- **Lines 29-30:** "dreams / The"
- **Lines 33-34:** "towers / Quivering"
- **Lines 35-36:** "flowers / So"
- **Lines 36-37:** "Thou / For"
- **Lines 37-38:** "powers / Cleave"
- **Lines 38-39:** "below / The"
- **Lines 39-40:** "wear / The"
- **Lines 45-46:** "share / The"
- **Lines 46-47:** "free / Than"
- **Lines 47-48:** "even / I"
- **Lines 48-49:** "be / The"
- **Lines 50-51:** "speed / Scarce"
- **Lines 51-52:** "striven / As"
- **Lines 55-56:** "bow'd / One"
- **Lines 59-60:** "harmonies / Will"
- **Lines 66-67:** "hearth / Ashes"
- **Lines 68-69:** "earth / The"

CAESURA

"Ode to the West Wind" uses caesura a lot. Not all of these caesuras are important to the poem, but many of them do play important roles. For example, look at the caesura in line 38:

> Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below

The caesura at the center of the line might play two different

roles. On the one hand, it could represent the deep troughs of the waves that the West Wind whips up: the cut in the middle of the line imitates the valley between the waves. Or it could represent the depths of the ocean, the distance that separates the surface, with its rough waves, from the "sea blooms and oozy woods" beneath them. In either case, the caesura—a spatial break in the poem—represents a spatial break in the world. The caesura here communicates to the reader the dynamics of the natural world, as the speaker understands them.

Elsewhere, the caesuras play different functions. For example, look at the second caesura, caused by the comma, in line 62:

> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Here the caesura splits the speaker ("me") from the wind, the "impetuous one." In other words, the caesura underlines the main problem that the poem struggles with—the speaker wants to have the same force and power as the wind, he wants to *be* the wind, but he remains separate and different from it.

This difference is underlined by the caesuras that appear in the last line of each of the poem's first three sections:

> Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear! (line 14)
> Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear! (line 28)
> And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear! (line 42)

The return of the phrase "oh hear!"—an instance of the poetic device refrain—reminds the reader that the speaker is not just *describing* the wind, he's also speaking directly to it. (That direct address to the wind is an example of apostrophe). It's almost as though the speaker forgets what he's doing and has to remind himself. But what he has to remind himself is that the wind *isn't* listening to him, that he has to ask it again and again to pay attention. Once again, then, the caesura emphasizes the difference between the speaker and the wind.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", "
- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 3:** ", "
- **Line 4:** ", ", ", ", "
- **Line 5:** ": "
- **Line 7:** ", "
- **Line 8:** ", "
- **Line 10:** ", "
- **Line 13:** ", "
- **Line 14:** "; ", "
- **Line 15:** ", "
- **Line 18:** ": "
- **Line 21:** ", "
- **Line 23:** ". "
- **Line 24:** ", "
- **Line 27:** ", "
- **Line 28:** ", ", ", ", ": "
- **Line 30:** ", "
- **Line 36:** ", " "! "
- **Line 38:** ", "
- **Line 40:** ", "
- **Line 41:** ", "
- **Line 42:** ": "
- **Line 45:** ", "
- **Line 46:** ", "
- **Line 47:** ", " "! "
- **Line 48:** ", "
- **Line 50:** ", "
- **Line 51:** "; "
- **Line 53:** ", ", ", ", "
- **Line 54:** "! "
- **Line 56:** "; ", ", ", "
- **Line 57:** ", "
- **Line 60:** ", "
- **Line 61:** ". ", ", "
- **Line 62:** "! ", ", "
- **Line 66:** ", "
- **Line 67:** ", "
- **Line 69:** "! "
- **Line 70:** ", "

SIMILE

In the first three sections of "Ode to the West Wind" the speaker uses simile to make the wind that he describes seem ghastly and spooky, closely linked to death and destruction. For instance, in lines 2-3 the speaker describes the wind blowing the autumn leaves around. This might be a charming, even beautiful thing—but the speaker finds it disturbing: they look like "ghosts from an enchanter fleeing." In other words, the wind seems to have supernatural power, and it works in close association with the dead. Indeed, the speaker consistently links the wind to death. Later, the wind carries seeds down to the earth, where they lie "cold and low, / Each like a corpse within its grave."

And where the wind isn't actively working with death, it seems wild and out of control. In section 2, the speaker compares the clouds that drives through the sky to "the bright hair uplifted from the head / of some fierce Maenad." The Maenads were the female followers of Dionysus—the Greek god of wine. They were known for their wild, out-of-control dancing. (And they were often depicted with their hair flying wild). The West Wind is here the force that makes them so wild, that drives them into their frenzy.

The similes thus set up a set of associations: the West Wind is linked to death and chaos. As if to underline the point, the speaker describes the Spring wind in very different terms: it "driv[es] sweet buds like flocks to feed in air." In other words, it brings out the Spring flowers. And it does so with the gentle, careful stewardship of a shepherd guiding a flock of sheep to the field. In contrast to the death and chaos associated with the West Wind, the Spring wind brings life and order.

In the final two sections of the poem, the speaker starts using simile in a different way. Instead of characterizing the wind, he uses it to characterize himself and his desires: "lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!" he demands in line 53, describing what he wants the wind to do to him. Similarly, in line 56, he describes how he was a child, "One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud." The speaker was once like the wind, but now he isn't—he has been "chain'd and bow'd." So he wants the wind to do to him what it does to the leaves, the waves, and the clouds, to push and drive him. The similes the speaker uses fit together nicely: because he is so diminished and weak, his thoughts are like "wither'd leaves." It makes sense for the West Wind to drive them too, just like any other leaf. In other words, the similes the speaker uses in the first three sections prepare the way for the similes later in the poem—and the speaker consciously plays off of them.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "from whose unseen presence the leaves dead / Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing"
- **Lines 7-8:** "where they lie cold and low, / Each like a corpse within its grave"
- **Line 11:** "Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air"
- **Line 16:** "Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Like the bright hair uplifted from the head / Of some fierce Maenad"
- **Lines 51-52:** "I would ne'er have striven / As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need. "
- **Line 53:** "lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!"
- **Line 56:** "One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud. "
- **Line 58:** "What if my leaves are falling like its own! "
- **Lines 63-64:** "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth! "
- **Lines 66-67:** "as from an unextinguish'd hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind! "

METAPHOR

"Ode to the West Wind" uses a lot of metaphors—so much so that it can be hard to keep track of all of them. But the poem does use metaphor in fairly consistent ways. In the first three sections, the speaker uses metaphor to help paint a rich, vivid portrait of the West Wind (and its "sister," the Spring wind).

One can see why the speaker might lean on metaphor to help describe the wind. As he acknowledges early in the poem, the West Wind is "unseen"—invisible—and yet it is also "moving everywhere." The wind is everywhere, but it's impossible to see: in a sense, the speaker *has* to compare it to other things in order to describe it.

So the speaker uses metaphor throughout the poem. He compares the wind to a "stream" or river—as though it were running water; he compares it to a sad song, "thou dirge / of the dying year." And he also uses metaphor to describe the things that the wind carries. The clouds become "angels of rain and lightning." The ground becomes the "dark wintry bed" of the seeds." And sometimes, just to make things even more complicated, the speaker uses simile and metaphor together. In line 16, he compares the clouds, driven by the West Wind to "decaying leaves," using a simile to do so. Then, in line 17 he says that those leaves came from the "tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean." In other words, the sky and the sea are like trees and the clouds have been knocked free from their branches are like leaves.

Later in the poem, the speaker starts to use metaphor to describe himself and his life. He notes in line 54 that he falls "upon the thorns of life." In other words, he has encountered the difficult, trying parts of life; they're sharp and painful, like thorns. And he describes himself as having "leaves." This parallels the simile the speaker uses in line 16. There, the clouds were like "decaying leaves" in line 58. Here the speaker is himself some kind of plant or tree, covered in dead leaves. The leaves represent his lost potential. In this sense, the metaphors and similes early in the poem set up the speaker, allowing him to reuse them later in the poem to describe himself.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red, / Pestilence-stricken multitudes"
- **Line 6:** "chariotest," "dark wintry bed"
- **Line 10:** "clarion"
- **Line 15:** "stream"
- **Line 17:** "Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean"
- **Line 18:** "Angels of rain and lightning"
- **Line 23:** "The locks of the approaching storm"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Thou dirge / Of the dying year"
- **Lines 24-27:** "this closing night / Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre, / Vaulted with all thy congregated might / Of vapours"
- **Line 38:** "Cleave themselves into chasms"
- **Line 41:** "Thy voice," "and suddenly grow gray with fear"
- **Line 45:** "A wave to pant beneath thy power"
- **Line 49:** "thy wanderings over Heaven,"
- **Line 54:** "the thorns of life"

- **Line 55:** "heavy weight of hours"
- **Line 58:** "my leaves"

APOSTROPHE

"Ode to the West Wind" contains one of the most famous examples of apostrophe in English poetry. In fact, the whole poem is essentially one long instance of apostrophe. Throughout the poem, the speaker is talking directly to the "wild West Wind." And the speaker talks to it like it's a person, asking it to help him out—"lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!"—even though the West Wind is a natural phenomenon. It can't hear or respond to the speaker. The speaker seems aware of that problem. In a sense, it's at the very heart of the poem.

The speaker needs the wind to listen to him, to help him—but he can't be sure that the wind can or will respond. As a result, the speaker occasionally reveals that he feels a little bit insecure about his own poem. For instance, at the end of each of the first three sections, the speaker asks the wind to listen to him—"hear, oh hear!" "oh hear!" and "oh hear!" he says. If the speaker asks the wind to listen to him, it's because he can't be sure the wind actually *is* listening to him. His repeated demand—"oh hear!"—reveals that he isn't sure the poem is actually working, that his use of apostrophe is really allowing him to speak to the wind. Indeed, late in the poem, the speaker describes his own poem as a "prayer"—a striking thing for a famously atheistic poet to say. The speaker is asking the wind for help, without any certainty that the wind will hear or even respond.

In this sense, the poem's use of apostrophe is unusually complicated. The speaker doesn't simply address the wind and assume that it's listening. Instead, the poem seems to question whether apostrophe actually works. This shows the reader some important things about the speaker and about the poem. First, the speaker is actively questioning the value of poetry, whether it's really as powerful as people say it is. And second, he's trying to figure out the relationship between human beings and nature. He wants to know whether human beings can communicate with nature—or if nature is so different, so foreign, that any attempt to do so (even through apostrophe) is doomed to fail. The speaker doesn't answer these questions. Though he calls passionately for the West Wind's help, the reader never learns whether or how the wind responds.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14
- Lines 15-28
- Lines 29-42
- Lines 43-56
- Lines 57-70

PERSONIFICATION

"Ode to the West Wind" is, in part, about the speaker's desire to connect with the West Wind: he wants it to listen to him—and to help him. But he betrays some uncertainty about whether the West Wind is even listening to him (he keeps demanding that it "hear"—as if he isn't sure that it *is* listening). At the heart of the poem, then, is a question about the relationship between human beings and nature: whether they can communicate with each other meaningfully—and whether they are similar or fundamentally different.

Personification has an important role to play in answering this question. After all, personification takes natural things and gives them human characteristics. Personification, then, is itself a kind of declaration that there's enough in common between the human and the natural worlds that they can resemble each other. The speaker uses personification often in "Ode to the West Wind," particularly in the first three sections of the poem. For example, he compares the dead leaves the West Wind blows to "Pestilence-stricken multitudes"—that is, to a human population that is suffering from a serious illness. He compares seeds to "corpse[s]" in the "grave"; he compares the clouds (twice!) to human hair.

None of these instances of personification are particularly remarkable; some of them are pretty traditional, even cliché. But because the poem keeps pressing, questioning, whether and how human beings relate to nature, they begin to seem suspect: the reader wonders how appropriate they really are. So even as personification in the poem seems to suggest that a connection between human and nature is possible to forge, the way it is used in the poem also sows doubt about that possibility.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "breath"
- **Line 5:** "Pestilence-stricken multitudes"
- **Line 6:** "chariotest"
- **Line 8:** "like a corpse within its grave"
- **Line 9:** "sister"
- **Line 11:** "Driving sweet buds like flocks"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Like the bright hair uplifted from the head / Of some fierce Maenad"
- **Line 23:** "The locks of the approaching storm"
- **Line 29:** "waken from his summer dreams"
- **Lines 30-31:** "he lay, / Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams"
- **Lines 40-42:** "know / Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear, / And tremble and despoil themselves"
- **Line 45:** "A wave to pant"
- **Line 49:** "thy wanderings over Heaven"
- **Line 68:** "unawaken'd earth "

REFRAIN

Each of the first three sections of "Ode to the West Wind" ends with a refrain: "hear, oh hear!" "oh hear!" and "oh hear!" This refrain plays an important role in the poem. It serves as a reminder that the speaker isn't simply describing the West Wind—he's also talking directly to it. (That's important because it means the poem is, in its entirety, an instance of apostrophe).

But the refrain also reveals that the relationship between the speaker and the West Wind is complicated. Although the speaker is talking *to* the wind, he can't be sure that the Wind is listening—indeed, that it can listen to him. By calling repeatedly for the Wind to "hear" him, the speaker suggests that he is insecure—unsure that he is really successfully communicating his wishes and desires to the wind, or that the wind will or can care.

In this sense, there's uncertainty at the heart of the poem—uncertainty about the relationship between human beings and natural phenomena like the West Wind. Although the speaker wants to communicate with nature, he's not sure that it's actually possible to do so. The poem's refrain thus does two things at once: it tries to establish a meaningful connection between the speaker and the natural world—and, as it does so, it reveals the speaker's uncertainty about whether such a connection is even possible.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "hear, oh hear! "
- **Line 28:** "oh hear!"
- **Line 42:** "oh hear!"

REPETITION

"Ode to the West Wind" uses repetition throughout—especially anaphora and parallelism. These devices help give structure and rhythm to a poem that otherwise feels wild and energetic. In the opening three sections of the poem, the speaker uses anaphora: most of the sentences in those sections start with the word "Thou." "Thou" is an old form of the word "You"; the speaker is talking directly to the West Wind. The repetition of this word serves to continually remind the reader that the whole poem is an instance of apostrophe. But it also helps to organize and contain the poem. The speaker says so many things in such a short space about the West Wind: it's helpful to come back, again and again, to this word, this address to the wind. It reminds the reader that what ultimately matters in the poem is the speaker's relationship with the wind, his attempt to communicate with the Wind.

In the final two sections of "Ode to the West Wind," the speaker turns to parallelism, using the device frequently. Section 4 opens with a series of "If" statements: "If I were a dead leaf…"; "If I were a swift cloud…" These phrases share the same grammatical structure (and, by repeating the same phrase at the start of lines 43-44, they also create anaphora). The speaker is imagining what he might do if the wind would lift him up, share its power with him. But the parallel construction emphasizes that this is a fantasy, rather than a reality: it calls attention to the crucial word in both lines, "If." And in the poem's final section, the speaker uses parallelism (with anaphora) again, issuing two commands to the Wind:

> … Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

The double command, rather than communicate confidence, instead underlines the speaker's anxiety about his relationship with the wind. One command won't do it: he needs to double up to make sure the wind hears and responds. Repetition thus structures the poem, giving its wild energy an underlying architecture—and as it does so, it also reflects the speaker's anxieties.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "thou"
- **Line 2:** "Thou"
- **Line 5:** "thou"
- **Line 15:** "Thou"
- **Line 23:** "Thou"
- **Line 29:** "Thou"
- **Line 36:** "Thou"
- **Lines 43-44:** "If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear; / If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee; "
- **Lines 47-48:** "If even / I were as in my boyhood"
- **Line 53:** "a wave, a leaf, a cloud! "
- **Lines 61-62:** "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit"
- **Line 62:** "Be thou me, impetuous one!"

ALLUSION

"Ode to the West Wind" contains several important allusions. For example, at the end of the first section, the speaker calls the West Wind, "destroyer and preserver." These are the traditional names of the Hindu gods Shiva and Vishnu. Shiva's role in the Hindu religion is to destroy the world while Vishnu's is to preserve it. The West Wind thus combines these contradictory roles. That contradiction is important to the poem: the speaker celebrates the West Wind because of its destructive power—and because that destruction will lead to rebirth and renewal.

Later in the poem, in section 2, the speaker alludes to Greek mythology, comparing the clouds that the West Wind whips through the sky to "the bright hair uplifted from the head / of some fierce Maenad." The Maenads were the female followers of the Greek god Dionysus. Dionysus was the god of wine; his followers were known for their ecstatic parties, which often featured wild dancing. In painting and sculpture, his followers

are shown with their hair flying from the energy of their dance.

The poem thus moves from Hinduism to Greek myth. And, if that isn't enough, it also folds in allusions to one of the most important poems in Christianity, Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The form that "Ode to the West Wind" takes—the terza rima—is itself an allusion to Dante: Dante used the same form in the *Divine Comedy*; because that poem is so famous and important, the form has become inseparable from him.

And "Ode to the West Wind" makes more specific allusion to Dante as well. In lines 2-5, the speaker compares the "leaves dead" to "ghosts" and "pestilence-stricken multitudes." This simile alludes to a famous simile from the first book of the *Divine Comedy*, the *Inferno*. In the *Inferno*, Dante and the poet Virgil travel through Hell together. As they enter Hell, Dante compares the souls of the dead to fallen leaves. In the passage, the dead are waiting for a signal from Charon, the spirit who ferries the dead into hell, that they can begin their crossing:

> Just as in autumn the leaves fall away
> one, and then another, until the bough
> sees all its spoil upon the ground,
>
> So the wicked seed of Adam fling themselves
> one by one from shore, at [Charon's] signal…

Alluding to this moment in Dante, the speaker suggests something important about the West Wind. It drives the leaves just as God drives the souls of the damned into Hell. In other words, it's righteous: its destructive power is designed to do good. The allusion also hangs over the other references the speaker makes to falling leaves. For instance, in line 58, the speaker asks "What if my leaves are falling like [the forest's] own?" The leaves that are falling from the speaker echo the leaves that appear earlier in the poem. The speaker too is shedding the damned and disposable parts of himself. This poem's allusions thus move across a wide range of cultures and religions to give the reader a sense of just how energetic and vital the West Wind really is, and the vital function it performs.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-5:** "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:"
- **Line 14:** "Destroyer and preserver"
- **Lines 20-21:** "the bright hair uplifted from the head / Of some fierce Maenad"

ALLITERATION

"Ode to the West Wind" uses alliteration often: use of this device is part of what makes the poem sound so good, so musical, so literary. But the device does more than simply make the poem sound good. It also plays an important role, reinforcing the speaker's description of the West Wind—and, later in the poem, his characterization of himself. For example, in the first line of the poem the speaker introduces the reader to the West Wind. In doing so, he uses two different alliterative sounds, /w/ and /b/

> O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being

The two alliterative sounds give the reader a clear sense of what's important about the wind, right from the very start of the poem. The strong /w/ sound at the start of the line links the "West Wind" to "wildness," emphasizing that it is, as the speaker later announces, "uncontrollable." And the /b/ sound underlines the link between the wind, the "breath," and Autumn's "being." The alliteration makes it feel like the wind really comes right out of Autumn's essence, which in turn links the wind to all things Autumn: like decay and death. In this way, the alliterations in the first line of the poem anticipate the speaker's later description of the wind as a violent, chaotic force, closely linked to death.

Later in the poem, the speaker asks for the wind to drive him with the same force and violence with which it drives leaves, clouds, and waves. He wants to be "a wave to pant beneath thy power." In other words, he wants the wind to push him so hard and fast that he's out of breath, panting. The alliterative /p/ sound in the line underlines the link between the power of the wind and the effect it has on the speaker, the way it pushes him to the limits of his physical abilities.

In this sense, the poem's alliterations perform different functions over the course of the poem. They help the speaker deliver a rich, dynamic description of the West Wind itself. And, at the same time, they help him characterize his own desires and demands.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wild West Wind," "breath," "being"
- **Line 2:** "dead"
- **Line 3:** "driven"
- **Line 4:** "pale"
- **Line 5:** "Pestilence"
- **Line 6:** "wintry"
- **Line 7:** "winged," "where," "lie," "cold," "low"
- **Line 8:** "like," "corpse"
- **Line 9:** "sister," "Spring"
- **Line 11:** "flocks," "feed"
- **Line 15:** "stream," "steep sky's"
- **Line 22:** "horizon," "height"
- **Line 25:** "vast"
- **Line 26:** "Vaulted"
- **Line 27:** "vapours"

- **Line 28:** "Black," "hail," "burst," "hear"
- **Line 30:** "lay"
- **Line 31:** "Lull'd," "coil," "crystalline"
- **Line 32:** "Beside," "Baiae's bay"
- **Line 33:** "saw," "sleep"
- **Line 34:** "Quivering," "within," "wave's"
- **Line 36:** "So sweet," "sense," "picturing"
- **Line 37:** "path," "powers"
- **Line 38:** "Cleave," "chasms," "below"
- **Line 39:** "blooms," "woods which wear "
- **Line 41:** "grow gray"
- **Line 45:** "pant," "power"
- **Line 48:** "could"
- **Line 49:** "comrade"
- **Line 50:** "skiey speed "
- **Line 51:** "Scarce," " seem'd," "striven"
- **Line 52:** "sore"
- **Line 53:** "lift," "leaf"
- **Line 54:** "life"
- **Line 57:** "Make me"
- **Line 59:** "tumult"
- **Line 60:** "take," "tone"
- **Line 61:** "Sweet," "sadness," "Spirit"
- **Line 62:** "spirit"
- **Line 63:** "Drive," "dead"
- **Line 67:** "my," "among mankind"
- **Line 69:** "Wind"
- **Line 70:** "Winter," "comes," "can," "be," "behind"

ASSONANCE

"Ode to the West Wind" uses a lot of alliteration and consonance. It's a bit more restrained in its use of assonance, though there's still plenty to be found in the poem. This in itself is revealing. The speaker likes harsher sounds, clattering consonants—and one can imagine why. They help him imitate the violent, destructive power of the West Wind; vowel sounds might be too soft and soothing for a poem like this. When the speaker does use assonance, he often uses it to emphasize the uncanny power of the West Wind. For example, in line 7, there's an assonant /o/ sound:

> The winged seeds, they lie cold and low

These /o/ sounds are mournful and desolate; they mimic the dreary, unhappy situation of the seeds that the West Wind carries to their "dark wintry bed." The assonance here echoes and amplifies the wind's destructive power.

The same assonant /o/ sound appears two lines later in the same stanza:

> Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Normally, one wouldn't hear assonance that is separated by two lines. But because "blow" and "low" rhyme, the reader *does* hear it. Here the speaker is talking about how the Spring wind will revive the seeds, lifting them from their graves. The /o/ sound here thus plays a different role: it mimics the triumphant sound of the Spring wind, its "clarion" or trumpet blast. But the sonic link between "low" and "blow" isn't simply random. Instead, it gets at an important dynamic in the poem. Only because the West Wind knocked the seeds loose and scattered them on the ground can they sprout in the Spring. The very destructive power of the West Wind makes it possible for there to be a revival, a resurrection. In this sense, the assonant link between "low" and "blow" gets at the essential argument of the poem: that destruction is necessary for renewal.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "being"
- **Line 2:** "unseen," "leaves"
- **Line 3:** "fleeing"
- **Line 4:** "red"
- **Line 5:** "Pestilence"
- **Line 6:** "chariotest," "bed"
- **Line 7:** "cold," "low"
- **Line 9:** "blow"
- **Line 15:** "Thou," "stream," "steep"
- **Line 16:** "clouds," "leaves"
- **Line 17:** "boughs"
- **Line 18:** "Angels," "rain"
- **Line 19:** "surface," "surge"
- **Line 32:** "Beside," "isle"
- **Line 34:** "wave's," "day"
- **Line 39:** "blooms," "oozy woods"
- **Line 40:** "ocean," "know"
- **Line 41:** "grow"
- **Line 47:** "O," "uncontrollable"
- **Line 51:** "vision," "striven"
- **Line 52:** "thee," "need"
- **Line 53:** "me," "leaf"
- **Line 54:** "bleed"
- **Line 55:** "hours," "bow'd"
- **Line 56:** "proud"
- **Line 57:** "thy lyre"

CONSONANCE

Alongside its frequent alliterations, "Ode to the West Wind" often uses consonance. Like alliteration, consonance accounts for some of the poem's sheer pleasure and energy—it's a fun poem to read because it's so full of sound, playfully and skillfully arranged. But, the poem also uses consonance to help it describe nature—the West Wind, the blue Mediterranean. For instance, the second and third lines of the poem contain a series of /s/ sounds:

> Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
> Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

/s/ sounds are pretty common in English poetry, and they often don't mean anything in particular—it's just hard to avoid using them. But here, they seem motivated and important: they mimic the whistling of the wind as it rages around the speaker. The consonance thus helps the line do two things at once: it both describes *and* mimics the wind. It helps the reader *hear* the wind as a powerful, overwhelming sound.

Later, in section three, consonance does almost the opposite. Describing the "blue Mediterranean," the speaker uses a series of /l/ sounds:

> The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
> Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams

The /l/ sounds wrap around and through the lines, much like the "coil[ed]" currents they describe. And they are soft and soothing. Instead of expressing the violence of the wind, they mimic the relaxing blue waters of the Mediterranean. Consonance thus plays different roles at different points in the poem—it doesn't just mean one thing. Instead, it takes on the characteristics of whatever the speaker happens to be describing, and reinforces his description of it.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wild West Wind," "breath," "being"
- **Line 2:** "unseen presence," "dead"
- **Line 3:** "driven," "ghosts"
- **Line 4:** "Yellow," "black," "pale," "hectic"
- **Line 5:** "Pestilence," "stricken," "multitudes"
- **Line 7:** "winged," "where," "lie cold ," "low"
- **Line 8:** "like," "corpse within," "until"
- **Line 9:** "sister," "Spring," " shall blow "
- **Line 10:** "clarion," "dreaming," "fill"
- **Line 11:** "Driving," "sweet," "like flocks," "feed"
- **Line 12:** "living," "plain," "hill"
- **Line 13:** "Wild Spirit," "which," "everywhere"
- **Line 14:** "Destroyer," "preserver," "hear," "hear"
- **Line 15:** "stream," "mid," "steep sky's commotion"
- **Line 16:** "Loose clouds like," "decaying leaves," "shed"
- **Line 17:** "Shook," "Ocean"
- **Line 18:** "spread"
- **Line 19:** "blue," "surface," "surge"
- **Line 20:** "bright," "hair," "head"
- **Line 21:** "some fierce," "Maenad," "even," "dim," "verge"
- **Line 22:** "horizon," "zenith's"
- **Line 23:** "dirge"
- **Line 24:** "dying," "closing"
- **Line 25:** "dome," "vast sepulchre"
- **Line 26:** "Vaulted," "congregated"
- **Line 27:** "solid atmosphere"
- **Line 28:** "Black," "hail will," "burst," "hear"
- **Line 29:** "summer," "dreams"
- **Line 30:** "blue," "Mediterranean," "lay"
- **Line 31:** "Lull'd," "coil," "crystalline," "streams"
- **Line 32:** "Beside," "pumice," "Baiae's bay"
- **Line 33:** "saw," "sleep," "palaces"
- **Line 34:** "within," "wave's"
- **Line 35:** "moss," "flowers"
- **Line 36:** "So sweet," "sense faints," "picturing"
- **Line 37:** "path," "Atlantic's level powers "
- **Line 38:** "Cleave themselves," "chasms," "while," "below"
- **Line 39:** "sea-blooms," "woods which wear "
- **Line 40:** "sapless," "foliage"
- **Line 41:** "voice," "suddenly grow gray"
- **Line 42:** "despoil"
- **Line 43:** "dead," "leaf"
- **Line 44:** "swift," "cloud," "fly"
- **Line 45:** "pant," "power"
- **Line 46:** "impulse," "strength," "only," "less"
- **Line 47:** "uncontrollable"
- **Line 48:** "could"
- **Line 49:** "comrade"
- **Line 50:** "outstrip"
- **Lines 50-51:** "skiey speed / Scarce seem'd"
- **Line 51:** "striven"
- **Line 52:** "thus," "thee," "prayer," "sore"
- **Line 53:** "lift," "leaf," "cloud"
- **Line 54:** "fall," "life," "bleed"
- **Line 56:** "tameless," "swift"
- **Line 57:** "Make me," "forest"
- **Line 58:** "leaves," "falling like," "its"
- **Line 59:** "tumult," "mighty," "harmonies"
- **Line 60:** "take," "deep," "autumnal tone"
- **Line 61:** "Sweet," "sadness," "Spirit fierce"
- **Line 62:** "spirit," "impetuous"
- **Line 63:** "Drive," "dead"
- **Line 64:** "Like," "leaves"
- **Line 65:** "incantation"
- **Line 66:** "Scatter," "unextinguish'd"
- **Line 67:** "Ashes," "sparks," "my," "among mankind"
- **Line 68:** "my," "unawaken'd"
- **Line 69:** "prophecy," "Wind"
- **Line 70:** "Winter," "comes," "can," "Spring," "be," "behind"

VOCABULARY

Breath (Line 1) - Exhalation. The speaker compares the west wind to someone exhaling: it is as though Autumn itself is breathing out.

Being (Line 1) - Essence or identity. The west wind is a pure

expression of Autumn itself.

Enchanter (Line 3) - Magician or sorcerer.

Hectic (Line 4) - Generally speaking, the word means "crazy or wild." In this part of the poem the speaker probably uses the word in a special sense, to mean "wasting or consuming." The speaker is subtly referring to the disease tuberculosis, also called consumption—and comparing the color of the failing leaves to the flushed, red color of the skin in people suffering and dying from the disease.

Pestilence-stricken (Line 5) - Sick or diseased.

Chariotest (Line 6) - Carries or conveys.

Azure (Line 9, Line 35) - A bright blue, often described as the color of the sky.

Clarion (Line 10) - A bright, loud trumpet blast.

Plain (Line 12) - A meadow or field. The word is not an adjective here: in other words, the speaker isn't saying the "odours" are plain—boring, ordinary. Instead, he's saying that the plains are full of "odours."

Mid (Line 15) - Amid, in the middle of.

Commotion (Line 15) - Turbulence or confusion.

Boughs (Line 17) - The branches of a tree or a bush.

Aëry (Line 19) - Full of air. Something that's "aëry" doesn't have a body or a form. The word can therefore also mean "spiritual" or "invisible."

Maenads (Line 21) - In Greek mythology, the Maenads were the female followers of the God Dionysus. Since Dionysus was the God of Wine, they are often associated with parties and wild dancing—and in paintings and sculpture, they are depicted with their hair scattered from their dancing.

Verge (Line 21) - Edge or lip.

Zenith (Line 22) - Highest spot, the peak.

Locks (Line 23) - Strands of hair.

Dirge (Line 23) - Sad or mournful song.

Sepulchre (Line 25) - Tomb or burial vault.

Congregated (Line 26) - Gathered or brought together.

Mediterranean (Line 30) - The sea that separates Europe from Africa, running from Spain and Morocco in the west (where it connects with the Atlantic Ocean), and the Middle East in the East.

Lull'd (Line 31) - Calmed or asleep.

Coil (Line 31) - Wrapped up in a circular shape (for instance: a coil of rope). Instead of running in a straight line, the currents of the Mediterranean wrap back on themselves.

Crystalline (Line 31) - Like crystal: clear and pure.

Streams (Line 31) - The current, the course of the water.

Pumice (Line 32) - A porous volcanic stone.

Baiae (Line 32) - A bay near Naples, Italy.

Atlantic (Line 37) - The ocean that separates North and South America from Europe and Africa. It drains into the Mediterranean in a narrow strait—the Straits of Gibraltar—located between Morocco and Spain.

Chasms (Line 38) - Deep troughs or valleys between waves. In other words, the waves being described are very high.

Oozy (Line 39) - Watery or slimy.

Sapless (Line 40) - Without sap. These underwater forests are not like trees on land, which use sap to move nutrients around the tree.

Foliage (Line 40) - The leaves of a plant or tree.

Despoil (Line 42) - To strip bare, to ruin. The underwater trees lose all their leaves when they hear the west wind.

Pant (Line 45) - Breathe hard. The speaker imagines that the west wind will drive him fast and hard like a wave, so he will breathe hard from the effort.

Impulse (Line 46) - Force or power.

Uncontrollable (Line 47) - Someone or thing that cannot be controlled.

Outstrip (Line 50) - Go faster than.

Skiey (Line 50) - Full of sky. In this case, the wind moves as fast as the sky.

Striven (Line 51) - Competed with, fought with, challenged, demanded.

Chain'd (Line 55) - Shackled, bound, or imprisoned.

Bow'd (Line 55) - Diminished or reduced; made weak.

Lyre (Line 57) - A small hand-held harp; traditionally, the instruments that ancient Greek poets played as they sang their songs.

Tumult (Line 59) - Ruckus; a loud, chaotic sound.

Harmonies (Line 59) - Powerful, sweet-sounding music.

Tone (Line 60) - Sound, musical note.

Impetuous (Line 62) - Spontaneous or unpredictable.

Quicken (Line 64) - To bring to life.

Incantation (Line 65) - A chant or song; often religious.

Verse (Line 65) - A poem. In this case, the speaker refers to his own poem.

Unextinguish'd (Line 66) - Still on fire.

Unawaken'd (Line 68) - The word can mean both "asleep" and "unknowing" or "unenlightened."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As its title announces, "Ode to the West Wind" is an ode, a form that has existed in Western culture since the Greeks. As the ode has moved across languages, cultures, and poetic traditions, it hasn't used a single meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, poets write odes in the forms that make the most sense to them. Shelley wrote his ode in terza rima, a form that the Italian poet Dante made famous in his depiction of Hell in the *Inferno*.

Furthermore, Shelley arranges his terza rima sections as sonnets, a form made popular in English by poets like William Shakespeare and Thomas Wyatt. To put that more bluntly: each section of the poem is its own sonnet. Yet the sonnets in Shelley's poem are slightly unusual, since they don't follow the rhyme scheme for either a Shakespearean or a Petrarchan sonnet, two of the most popular types of sonnets.

However, even though this poem's sonnets are a little weird, they quietly acknowledge the history and importance of the sonnet in English poetry. "Ode to the West Wind" is a kind of miniature sonnet sequence, like Edmund Spencer's *Amoretti* or Sir Phillip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. These older poets used sonnets to depict speakers who were tangled in hopeless love affairs. Shelley updates this tradition by depicting a speaker professing profound admiration for an element of nature—the west wind.

METER

"Ode to the West Wind" is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter has a duh-DUH rhythm, with five feet in each line. One can hear this rhythm clearly in the poem's 7th line ("winged" is pronounced so that it has two syllables):

> The wing- | ed seeds, | where they | lie cold | and low.

However, for most of "Ode to the West Wind" the meter is *not* smooth and regular. Instead, it is full of metrical substitutions, which alter the rhythm and feeling of its lines. One can see this in the poem's first stanza, which doesn't contain a single metrically regular line.

> O wild | West Wind, | thou breath | of Aut- | umn's be- | ing,
> Thou, from | whose un- | seen pre- | sence the | leaves dead
> Are dri- | ven, like ghosts | from an | enchant- | er flee- | ing

The first line of the poem starts with a normal, iambic foot: "O wild." But the next foot is a spondee: "West Wind." And the line ends with an extra, unstressed syllable: "being." (This is a feminine ending.)

Line 2 is more regular, but it ends with another spondee: "leaves dead." As a result, both of the first two lines in the poem have an extra stressed syllable. Line 3 also ends on an unstressed syllable. Furthermore, this line is a full twelve syllables long! Thus, though the poem loosely follows iambic pentameter, it mostly employs highly irregular lines.

Such metrical details can become overwhelming; the lines are so irregular that it gets hard to fully describe all their metrical variations. The good news is that these individual variations aren't as important as their general effect. What really matters is that the poem starts in a kind of chaotic state. Usually poets like to establish a meter first and then introduce variations on it. Not Shelley: the first metrically regular line of the poem is the poem's 7th line! In other words, it takes the poem a full six lines before it finds its rhythm. And even after that it often diverges into irregularities.

The poem does this purposefully: the speaker is imitating the west wind itself. The speaker wants to take on the violent energy of the wind, the way it rushes through the world, sowing chaos. The poem's unsteady meter reflects the wind's energy and violence—and tries to make that energy and violence part of the poem.

RHYME SCHEME

"Ode to the West Wind" is written in terza rima. Terza rima is mostly defined by its interlocking rhyme scheme. The first stanza of a terza rima poem follows an ABA rhyme scheme. The next stanza picks up the B rhyme and adds a new rhyme: BCB. Then the pattern repeats itself: CDC, DED. There's no limit to how long a poet can go on like this: a terza rima poem may include any number of stanzas. But the final two lines of terza rima always form a rhyming couplet, EE. This final couplet serves as a kind of punctuation, marking the end of the poem or the section of the poem. Thus, in this poem, each section follows the following rhyme scheme:

> ABA BCB CDC DED EE

As with the poem's meter, one finds a number of weird, irregular rhymes in "Ode to the West Wind." For instance, there are the slant rhymes in the poem's first section—between "thou" and "low" in lines 5 and 7, or "everywhere" and "hear" in lines 13-14. The wind is a disruptive, chaotic force: the poem's strained rhymes reflect its power and its violence. The wind is so powerful that it has knocked the poem out of alignment, roughing up its meter and disrupting its rhymes.

Terza rima is originally an Italian form. It was developed during the Middle Ages and popularized by the poet Dante, in his epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, which follows the poet on a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. For many readers, any poem written in terza rima instantly calls Dante to mind. It's

thus associated with some of the most powerful and ambitious poetry ever written. The poem's rhyme scheme suggests that the speaker intends this poem to be ambitious and deadly serious—that he is taking the reader on a journey as equally epic as *The Divine Comedy*.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Ode to the West Wind" is anonymous. However, the reader does learn some important and helpful information about the speaker late in the poem. The speaker is not a child anymore, and is man, since in line 48 he refers to his "boyhood" as being over. He looks back on childhood mournfully: he feels like he's lost his freedom and strength as he's grown up. In the poem's fourth section, he notes that as a child he was "the comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven"—meaning that he was able to explore and wander with the west wind as it raced across the sky.

Further, the speaker is a poet. In line 65, the speaker asks the wind to "scatter" his "verse" across "mankind." He is interested in the west wind because of the way that it promises to expand and empower his creativity. The speaker further seems to have frustrations with the world in which he lives: he wants to send his ideas and words out into the world with the hope that they will spark change and renewal. Though the speaker doesn't ever tell the reader *what* he's frustrated with, many readers have assumed that his frustrations are political in nature: the speaker wants his poem to help create a new, and better society.

SETTING

According to Shelley's own note on the poem, "Ode to the West Wind" was composed in the woods near Florence, Italy in 1819: "This poem was…written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains ..." The poem is thus linked—for its poet, at least—to a specific time and place.

But—surprisingly—the poem doesn't really refer to that time and place: there are no specific references to Florence or the Arno river that runs through it (though the speaker does eventually refer to "Baiae's bay," a bay near Naples in the south of Italy). And the poem doesn't describe a particular gust of wind. Instead, the poem soars across the world, describing the west wind's effects on the earth, the sea, and the skies. Because the poem is about the west wind in general (and not some particular gust or storm) it has to transcend a specific setting and talk about how the west wind behaves generally. Thus, the poem's setting encompasses the entire world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Percy Bysshe Shelley was an important poet in a movement known as *Romanticism*. Romanticism appeared at the end of the 18th century (around, say, 1780). It was a reaction to the intellectual and poetic trends that dominated in the 1700s. Prominent thinkers like Voltaire and Denis Diderot stressed the importance of reason, rationality, and science. Anything that wasn't reasonable and scientific, they rejected—treating it as backward and primitive. These thinkers had a big effect on poetry. Poets worked to purify their poems of anything that might be irrational or out-of-control.

For early Romantic poets, like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, this emphasis on reason and rationality felt limiting—almost like a kind of repression. They sought to liberate the powers of the irrational, to write poetry that tapped into the deep, dark undercurrents of the human mind. Shelley, who wasn't even born until Romanticism had gotten underway, followed their example. But he, along with his peers—poets like John Keats and Lord Byron—felt that poets like Wordsworth had betrayed the movement they started, becoming too conservative as they aged. He hoped to restore Romanticism to its earlier, more revolutionary possibilities.

Shelley also often looked to the Greeks for philosophical and poetic inspiration. In "Ode to the West Wind," he adapts the ancient Greek form of the ode. The ancient poet Pindar composed odes to celebrate the victories of athletes in the Olympic Games. In this tradition, odes usually praise powerful and important people, or even gods. Because of their association with powerful people, such odes tend to be politically conservative poems that praise society as it currently is, instead of calling for change.

Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" follows many of the traditions of the ode: it is an ornate poem, full of elevated language and tricky poetic devices. And it praises the destructive power of the west wind, asking if the poet might share in that power. However, the west wind is, of course, different than a king or an Olympic athlete. The speaker praises a facet of the weather rather than something human.

Yet just because Shelley's poem is about the natural world doesn't mean that it's disconnected from human politics. Many readers interpret the poem's ending as a demand for social change—change that Shelley hopes his poem can inspire.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Ode to the West Wind" was written in 1819. Its author, Percy Shelley, held a number of political beliefs that, at the time, were pretty radical: he was in favor, for instance, of abolishing slavery; he developed ideas about using non-violent protest to resist unjust power structures; and he advocated for the

independence of Ireland from England—among many other positions.

But 1819 was a difficult time to be a politically radical person. Whereas the French Revolution had been a symbol of democratic hope to a previous generation of poets, such as Wordsworth, by 1814 the King of France, Louis XVIII, had been reinstated. All the bloodshed and energy of the revolution had resulted in a return to monarchy—the very form of government the revolution had tried to get rid of.

In England, society was becoming more and more conservative as the Victorian Era approached. In other words, for someone like Shelley, it probably felt like the world was moving backward in 1819, away from the direction he hoped it would eventually take. This sense of defeat is evident in "Ode to the West Wind," reflected in the speaker's feeling that only destruction of society as it is currently can pave the way for something new and better.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Percy Bysse Shelley — A detailed biography of Shelley from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/percy-bysshe-shelley)
- How Percy Shelley Stirred His Politics Into His Teacup — An article on Shelley's anti-slavery politics, from NPR. (https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/08/04/429363868/how-percy-shelley-stirred-his-politics-into-his-tea-cup)
- "Ode to the West Wind" Read Aloud — Tom O'Bedlam reads Percy Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" aloud in its entirety. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPT-W7rIzQs)
- The Romantics — An essay on the history of Romantic poetry, the poetic movement to which Shelley belonged, from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics)
- Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" — The full text of Percy Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry"—an essay in which he lays out his ideas about what poetry should be and how it could be a force for change in the world. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- Love's Philosophy
- Ozymandias
- To a Skylark

HOW TO CITE

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