The Late Romantics

Selected Poetry by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Meet the Author

Percy Bysshe Shelley 1792–1822

An idealist and a nonconformist, Percy Bysshe Shelley passionately opposed all injustice and dreamed of changing the world through poetry. He wrote with the fervent conviction that poetry nourishes the imagination, and the imagination—by enabling empathy for others—brings about social change.

Turbulent Early Years Born into an aristocratic family, Shelley enjoyed a happy early childhood. At school at Eton, however, the shy and eccentric adolescent suffered constant bullying, an experience that fueled a lifelong hatred of tyranny and conformity. Although Shelley enjoyed greater acceptance at Oxford University, he was soon expelled from the school for circulating an essay defending atheism. His refusal to renounce his views, coupled with his elopement in 1811 with the 16-year-old Harriet Westbrook, caused a permanent rupture with his conservative father.

Poet and Activist In 1812, Shelley moved to Dublin, where his work on behalf of Catholic emancipation and independence for Ireland brought him under the scrutiny of the British government. In his first major poem, Queen Mab (1813), he continued to attack social institutions such as marriage, the monarchy, and the church.

In 1814, Shelley met and fell in love with another radical thinker, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, the daughter of the philosopher William Godwin and the feminist author Mary Wollstonecraft. Abandoning Harriet, who was then expecting their second child, Shelley eloped to France with Mary, returning to England several weeks later.

Social Outcast Shelley’s scandalous behavior drew severe censure from British society, and he soon found himself an outcast. In 1816, Shelley fled with Mary to Geneva, Switzerland, where his stimulating conversations with the poet Lord Byron invigorated his thinking and writing. Two years later, following the suicide of Harriet, Shelley finally married Mary Godwin, and the couple settled permanently in Italy.

In 1819, despite his grief over the recent deaths of his two infant children, Shelley produced many of his greatest poems, including “Ode to the West Wind” and the verse drama Prometheus Unbound.

A Tragic Death Between 1820 and 1822, Shelley enjoyed a period of relative stability in Pisa, during which he composed many fine lyrics, including Adonais, an elegy in memory of John Keats. On July 8, 1822, Shelley and a friend drowned when their boat capsized in a sudden storm. Shelley’s ashes were buried in Rome, near the graves of John Keats and Shelley’s son William.
LITERARY ANALYSIS: RHYTHMIC PATTERNS

Shelley’s poetry is admired for its musicality, among other qualities. One element that makes poetry musical is meter, the regular repetition of a rhythmic unit. Each unit of meter, known as a foot, consists of one stressed syllable (⃗) and one or more unstressed syllables (−). An iamb is a foot that contains an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: rēgrēt. A trochee is a foot that contains a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: sórrōw. The first chart shows types of feet. Meter is also expressed in terms of the number of feet in a line, as shown in the second chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Foot</th>
<th>Number of Feet</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iamb (− ⃗)</td>
<td>monometer—one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trochee (⃗ −)</td>
<td>dimeter—two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anapest (− − ⃗)</td>
<td>trimeter—three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dactyl (⃗ − ⃗)</td>
<td>tetrameter—four</td>
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<td></td>
<td>pentameter—five</td>
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<td></td>
<td>hexameter—six</td>
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Iambic pentameter, the most common meter in English, contains five sets of iambics:

I met a traveler from an antique land

As you read the following poems, identify the meter. Also notice departures from the regular meter and the effect they have.

Review: Rhyme Scheme

READING SKILL: UNDERSTAND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of a literary work refers to the social conditions that inspired or influenced its creation. Romanticism in 19th-century England developed in part as a reaction to the French Revolution, the rise and fall of Napoleon, the industrialization of the economy, and the poverty and oppression of workers. Shelley wrote “Ode to the West Wind” in 1819, the year of the Peterloo massacre, in which workers demonstrating for reform were killed by soldiers. Another poem, “Sonnet: England in 1819,” explicitly condemns England’s “leech-like” rulers, her army’s “liberticide,” and her “Christless” religion. As you read the following works by Shelley, written over a span of 2½ years, consider their historical context and that they are poems of protest.

What can NATURE teach us?

Romantic poets believed that profound lessons could be learned from observing nature. They believed that there was no greater beauty than that found in nature, and they saw higher truths reflected in natural scenes.

QUICKWRITE Visualize one of the following elements of nature—a sand dune, the wind, or a bird. Think deeply about it. What lesson about life could it suggest to you? Contemplating the wind, for example, might make you realize that any life circumstance can suddenly change, as the wind does. Jot down one possible lesson about life and discuss it in a small group. Then read Shelley’s poems to find out what lessons he saw in sand, the west wind, and the song of a skylark.

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

**Literary Analysis**

1. **Clarify**  What kind of man was Ozymandias?
2. **Identify Irony**  What is ironic about the words on his pedestal?
3. **Understand Historical Context**  What message is there in the poem for European kings or self-proclaimed emperors like Napoleon?

**RHYTHMIC PATTERNS**

What words in lines 12 and 13 are emphasized by their departure from the regular meter?

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2 *trunkless legs*: legs separated from the rest of the body.
4 *visage* (vīˈzā): face.
6–8 The passions outlast the sculptor whose hand mocked those passions and the king whose heart fed those passions.
10 *Ozymandias* (ōzˈən-dē-əs): a Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II, who reigned from 1279 to 1213 B.C.

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Head of Rameses II at Thebes, Egypt
ODE TO THE West Wind

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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 chariost to their dark wintry bed
The wingéd 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 odors 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 bough of Heaven and Ocean,

RHYTHMIC PATTERNS
Read lines 1–9 aloud. What is the predominant meter?

4 hectic: feverish.

9 sister . . . Spring: the reviving south wind of spring.

10 clarion: a trumpet with a clear, ringing tone.

RHYME SCHEME
Describe the interlocking pattern of rhyme, called terza rima, in the first four stanzas of section I. How does the fifth stanza bring the pattern to a close?
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 sepulcher,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might
Of vapors, 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,
Lulled by the coil of his crystálline 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

18 angels: messengers.
19 aëry: airy.
20–22 Like . . . height: The clouds lie in streaks from the horizon upward, looking like the streaming hair of a maenad (mē'nād')—a wildly dancing female worshiper of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine.
23 dirge: funeral song.
25 sepulcher (sēp′al-kar′): tomb.
31 crystálline (krī′s-tā′līn) streams: the different-colored currents of the Mediterranean Sea.
32 pumice (pūm′īs): a light volcanic rock; Baiae's (bē′ōz′) bay: the Bay of Naples, site of the ancient Roman resort of Baiae.
37 level powers: surface.
The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skyey speed
Scarce seemed 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 chained and bowed
One too like thee: timeless, 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 withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

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

Literary Analysis

1. Analyze the Ode An ode is an exalted, complex lyric that
develops a single, dignified theme. Many odes praise people
or elements of nature. What qualities of the west wind are
glorified in this ode?

2. Make Inferences What does the poet request of the west
wind, and why?

3. Interpret Metaphor Give your interpretation of the last line.
What might be meant by “Winter” and “Spring”?

D HISTORICAL CONTEXT
In lines 63–70, what does the poet imply is the state of the
world? Relate these lines to the social conditions mentioned on
pages 860 and 861.
Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
Bird thou never wert,  
That from Heaven, or near it,  
Pourest thy full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

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

In the golden lightning  
Of the sunken sun,  
O’er which clouds are bright’ning,  
Thou dost float and run;  
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.
The pale purple even
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of Heaven,
In the broad daylight
20 Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight,

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

All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
30 The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflowed.

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

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

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

Like a glowworm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering unbeknown
Its aërial hue
50 Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view!
Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
55 Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-wingéd thieves:

Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened flowers,
All that ever was
60 Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass:

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

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

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

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

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
85 Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?
We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

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

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

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

Literary Analysis

1. **Recall** To what things does the speaker compare the skylark?

2. **Summarize** In the speaker’s eyes, what makes the skylark different from humans and its song different from human songs?

3. **Clarify** In lines 101–105, what does the speaker want the skylark to teach him, and what would he do with this knowledge?
An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king—
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn—mud from a muddy spring—
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leechlike to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow—
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field—
An army, which liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield—
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;
A Senate—Time’s worst statute unrepealed,
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

1. An old, mad . . . king: King George III, who had ruled since 1760 and was declared incurably insane in 1811. He died in 1820.

8. liberticide: the killing of freedom.
12. statute unrepealed: the law forbidding Catholics to hold office.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Shelley strongly protests King George III’s rule by building a dramatic list of the negative effects the king has had on England. How does the way Shelley constructs his poem as a list contribute to its power as a work of political protest?
Comprehension

1. Recall How does Shelley describe the king of England?

2. Recall According to the poem, what are the effects of the king’s rule on England’s people?

3. Clarify What does the “Phantom” at the end of the poem signify?

Literary Analysis

4. Compare Imagery What are the most striking images in these four poems? Explain what makes this imagery effective.

5. Interpret Symbols In the poems, what larger ideas are symbolized by the following elements of nature?
   - the sands near the statue of Ozymandias
   - the skylark
   - the west wind
   - the muddy spring

6. Examine Rhythmic Patterns What is the meter of each poem? In which poem is the meter most regular? Discuss instances in which the rhythm of lines helps communicate ideas.

7. Evaluate Sound Devices How skillfully does Shelley use other sound devices besides meter? Support your opinion with examples.

8. Analyze Form Review page 311, and then explain how “Ozymandias” shows the characteristics of a Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet. How closely do the numbered sections of “Ode to the West Wind” match the sonnet form?

9. Apply Historical Context Use your knowledge of Shelley’s times and political views to interpret his four poems as protest poems. From the poems, what would you guess is his vision of an ideal society?

Literary Criticism

10. Critical Interpretations In “A Defense of Poetry” (page 876), Shelley writes that “Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed.” In what ways is this comment reflected in the poems you read? Explain.

What can NATURE teach us?

Name an animal that, to you, symbolizes an abstract concept, such as liberty or fear. Which characteristics of this animal symbolize the concept? Why?
Conventions in Writing

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Create Effective Imagery

Shelley was an inventive poet who created striking and exquisite imagery through his use of personification. Personification is a figure of speech in which an object, animal, or idea is given human qualities. In the following passage from “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley personifies the sea life in the Mediterranean to show how powerfully the west wind affects it:

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! (lines 39–42)

Notice how Shelley assigns characteristics to the natural world that would normally be attributed to humans, such as fear to the sea plants and a voice to the west wind. This use of personification enables readers to form a vivid mental picture of the wind and its power.

PRACTICE Copy each of the following lines from “Ode to the West Wind.” Then compose your own lines about an element of nature, mimicking Shelley’s use of personification in order to create effective imagery.

EXAMPLE

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!
Lonely sky, which art weeping everywhere, / Mourner and rager; sleep, oh sleep!

1. ... O thou, / Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed / The wingéd seeds, where they lie cold and low, ...

2. Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow / Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, ...

READING-WRITING CONNECTION

Expand your understanding of Shelley’s poems by responding to this prompt. Then use the revising tips to improve your poem.

WRITING PROMPT

WRITE A POEM Write a poem in which you attempt to capture the “sleeping beauty” of an element of nature, as Shelley does in “Ode to the West Wind” and “To a Skylark.” Try to use rhyme, meter, and personification as Shelley does in his poems.

REVISING TIPS

• Include rich imagery that appeals to the five senses.
• Address your subject as if it were human to help personify it.