

Kyrylo Kulikovskiy

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Mrs. Schroeder

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The Power of Wind in Percy Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*

Percy Bysshe Shelley was a 19th century English writer who created political works as well as creative poems. From his early years, Shelley showed interest in science, literature, philosophy, and the supernatural. Romanticism, Shelley's primary poetic genre, was an artistic movement that lasted from the late 18th to the early 19th century, contrasting the Enlightenment movement. While the Enlightenment focused on formal reasoning and scientific inquiry as the primary means of understanding the world, Romanticism emphasized the importance of emotion and intuition, focusing on natural human feelings rather than logic. Romantic poets often found inspiration in nature, which they saw as a source of lessons and virtues applicable to life and society. One example of a nature-inspired poem by Percy Shelley is *Ode to the West Wind*, an ode of five cantos, or parts, that explores the wind's effect on nature, portraying it as both a destructive and restorative force. This duality manifests itself in two tone shifts in the ode, allowing Shelley to teach that change should not to be feared as it brings not only challenges but also opportunities, advocating for societal change.

In the first canto, Shelley implements a shift from solemn to grateful tone through the use of diction. In the first three stanzas, Shelley describes the wind blowing away dead leaves using words like "dead", "ghosts", "pestilence-stricken", "corpse", and "grave" (2-3, 5, 8). The significance of these words lies in their association with death and disease. By using this type of diction, Shelley connects the wind to one of its roles in nature — to clean up dead life by blowing away leaves. This role exemplifies a destructive force, which creates a solemn tone as Shelley acknowledges the wind's power to destroy. Later, in stanzas four through five, Shelley uses words such as "earth", "sweet", "buds", "air", "living", "plain", "hill" (10-13). These words are associated with nature, showing a use of nature-related diction. By showing that nature can be not

only fierce and destructive but also peaceful, Shelley draws attention to the wind's other role in nature being to create life to develop a grateful tone. As Shelley writes solemnly at first and later becomes grateful to the wind, a tone shift is created.

Throughout the second and third cantos, Shelly implements a similar tone shift from solemn to grateful, this time with the use of visual imagery. In the second canto, Shelley paints an image of "Angels of rain and lightning . . . On the blue surface of thine aëry surge . . . the approaching storm . . . Black rain, and fire, all hail will burst" (18-19, 23, 28). Shelley uses visual imagery that illustrates unpleasant weather to emphasize the power of the wind by depicting its manifestation in nature. Because these displays of the wind's power are capable of causing destruction and death, this part of the poem further builds the wind's destructive powers and contributes to a solemn tone. Later, in stanzas three through four of the third canto, Shelley illustrates "The blue Mediterranean . . . Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams . . . azure moss and flowers / So sweet . . . sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear the sapless foliage of the ocean" (30-31, 35-36, 39-40). Shelley now uses visual imagery depicting calm nature, such as the eye-catching waters of the sea and beautiful plant life. Similarly to fierce weather, it is also a product of the wind, which stirs motion in water and spreads the seeds needed for plants to grow. Through the depiction of calm nature, Shelley builds a grateful tone by acknowledging the wind's contributions to a beautiful world.

In their literary critiques of *Ode to the West Wind*, writers I. J. Kapstein and Stewart C. Wilcox discuss the significance of the wind's contrasting powers of destruction and restoration. In *The Symbolism of the Wind and the Leaves in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind"*, Kapstein explains that "the poet prays that he, like leaf, cloud, and wave, may undergo the power of the wind in order to achieve his own regeneration, and . . . that from his dead thoughts driven over the earth by the wind there will arise . . . a re-generating influence upon mankind" (*PMLA*). Kapstein shows his understanding of the wind's significance in relation to humans by explaining Shelley's desire for the wind to affect himself and mankind. Since the wind first destroyed nature but later restored it, an application of the wind to humans would first cause difficulty, but eventually yield a better result. Stewart C. Wilcox presents an agreeing view in *Imagery, Ideas, and*

Design in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind": "With mastery Shelley thus plays the changes on his basic concept of cyclicity. His images have sprung forth in a lyric which is itself potential form — it will help quicken a new period of happiness for man after he has outlived the winter of his discontent" (*Studies in Philology*). Similarly to Kapstein, Wilcox connects the wind's destructive and restorative effects to a potential for change among humans that will produce benefits after initial difficulty. To further analyze this, it is important to consider Shelley's background as a political writer. Throughout his career, he proposed arguments against oppressive religion and tyranny, which impacted his life when Oxford University expelled Shelley and his peers deemed him an erring sinner for his heretical views. Shelley's involvement in politics suggests that he was in favor of societal change, symbolized in the ode as the wind's effect on nature. Just as nature was initially harmed by the wind but later restored, similarly, a new societal movement may initially encounter resistance but ultimately result in an improvement for everyone. By advocating for the application of the wind's power to people, Shelley invokes in his readers a motivation for achieving change in society.

Throughout the cantos of Percy Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, two shifts from a solemn tone to a grateful one are evident. In both, Shelley initially focuses on the destructive power of wind, depicting its negative effect on nature as it buries dead leaves and stirs unpleasant weather such as storms and hail. Later, however, the focus shifts to the wind's restorative effects as stormy seas turn to azure streams and buried seeds sprout into blooming buds. Overall, the restoration of nature after its destruction suggests that the long-term effects of change are worth the initial troubles. In their respective articles, Kapstein and Wilcox notice Shelley's suggested connection of nature's transformation by the wind to a potential, similar transformation that should occur in society. Despite *Ode to the West Wind* seeming like a purely creative work on the surface, Shelley uses it similarly to his political works to teach about society and politics, reminding readers that societal change is overall worth it despite the initial resistance that a movement may encounter. Ultimately, Shelley's lesson urges readers to overcome their concerns in an effort to create a better world.