UNIT 10: P. B. SHELLY: "ODE TO THE WEST WIND"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- analyse the poem "Ode to the West Wind" in terms of different aspects
- trace the different themes available in the poem
- explain Shelly's poetic style

10.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the Block entitled "Romantic Poetry II". In this unit, you will be introduced to one of the most anthologised poems of P. B. Shelly—"Ode to the West Wind". In this poem, the poet invokes the 'wild' West Wind, which scatters the dead leaves and spreads seeds so that they can sprout with the advent of the Spring season, and urges that the West Wind should hear him. Shelley wrote the poem in a forest on the bank of the river Arno near Florence. The notes on the poem tell us that he received the inspiration to write the poem from his experience of a strong West Wind that swept down from the Atlantic and through the Tuscan landscape of West-central Italy. From the different sections of this unit, you will be able to discuss the poem in question, in terms of its various aspects.

10.3 READING THE POEMS

10.3.1 The Texts of the Poem

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's beauty,
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!
Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,
Angels of rain and lightening: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aery 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!
Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled 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 spaless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves oh, hear!
If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest 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 skyey speed
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'ver 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 throns of life! I bleed!
A heavy weight of hours has chained, and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift and proud.
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?

Reading the Poem:

P. B. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" was composed in 1819. The poem was conceived in a wood that skirts Arno, near Florence, on a day when the West Wind was blowing strongly, heralding a storm at the beginning of the autumn rains. Shelly himself tells us about the genesis of the poem in the following words:

"This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapors which pour down the autumnal rains. They begin, as I foresaw, at sunset, with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions."

This means that the poem came out of a specific experience. The imagery of the poem clearly suggests an actual natural phenomenon that Shelly had observed.

The poem is divided into five stanzas which are as follows. In the **first** stanza, Shelley describes how the West Wind works over the Earth. All the seeds wake up when the azure sister of the West Wind's gives a rousing call to duty. The West Wind acts as shepherd driving the flocks of sheep to grazing ground. In the **second** stanza, Shelley explains how the West Wind blows so violently in the sky above as over the earth below. It causes a great upsurge in the sky and gives the signal of the approaching storm which is foreshadowed by the clouds scattered all over the sky. The West Wind spreads the dark clouds from one end of horizon to another. In the **third** stanza, Shelley addresses the West Wind as the spirit that affects the sea with its mighty power. The West Wind stirs the

tranquil surface of the Mediterranean when it seems to be sleeping peacefully in summer. The Mediterranean is so quiet in summer that the mansions and towers which once stood on its shores are reflected clearly on its surface. But when the West Wind starts blowing, the clear reflection vanishes. Such is the power of West Wind that it causes a great whirlpool in the Atlantic Ocean. In the **fourth** stanza, the poet stands badly in need of energy and strength. He is fully conscious of his limitations. Hence, he appeals to the West Wind to animate him with its power. He would like to be the dead leaf, a cloud or a wave to be swept along by its power. The poet is weak. He has been worn out with the trails and sufferings of life. He himself wants to be the West Wind so that he can drive his dead thoughts over the universe. In the **final** stanza, he passionately appeals to the West Wind to identify its spirits with his own. He feels that by coming in contact with his mind, the West Wind will be softened with the sadly sweet music autumn. Yet, he appeals to the wind to stimulate him in order that through the magic spell of his poetry, he may sing to the world the inspiring note of the coming millennium.

A special attraction of Shelley's poetry is his use of images which makes him one of the most typical and most admired of the later Romantic poets. His imagery tends to be abstract though highly passionate. F. R. Leavis remarks, perhaps justly, that Shelley at his best and worst offers the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void. Sometimes, he invests nature with human or divine attributes, such as we find in classical mythology. This myth making power is explicit in the poem "Ode to the West Wind", where the blue Mediterranean is no more a sea but a giant in deep slumber. Sometimes, Nature in Shelley, far from being dead matter in motion, lives a life of her own as human beings do. That is why Shelley prays to nature for help when he falls 'upon the thorns of life.'

"Ode to the West Wind" is often considered one of the most impassioned of Shelley's shorter poems. Structurally, the poem

consists of three parallel invocations of the West Wind in its three fields of operation—on the land, in the sky and on the sea. The invocations are followed by a prayer to the wind:

"If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power." (Lines: 43-45)

All seeds remain in embryo, until West Wind's sister, mild breeze of spring, comes and helps them sprout. It is important to note that the West Wind has been perceived in different ways. With the rousing call to action, the West Wind urges the seeds to wake up. Another connotation is that the West Wind acts as a shepherd driving the flocks of sheep to grazing ground. As the wind purifies the woods, so does the wind sweeten the sky, clear the ocean, and make stronger and sounder the heart of man. With each fresh variation of the original thought, the poet uses superb imagery, strengthening the main theme: "O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud." He further writes:

"Make me as thy lyre even as the forest is....
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" (Lines 57-64)

This poem thus reflects Shelley's own rebellious spirit, as available in most of his poems. The very spirit of Nature overpowers his poetic sensibilities which results in his superb and heart touching poems. Then from the general, the poem passes to the universal. The old world must go, and a new world must come with the Spring, laden with fresh sweet promises for suffering humanity. So, the poet utters:

"O, wind,
If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" (Lines 69-70)

The lyric ends with a significant rhetorical question and this expression continues to inspire people through its universal significance.



LET US KNOW

The fact that the poem "Ode to the West Wind" was written near Florence, Dante's city, may explain why Shelley used Terza Rima, the stanza form that Dante used in his *Divine Comedy*, but very rare in English odes. Terza Rima is a series of triplets with interlocking rhymes, aba, bcb, cdc, etc. Shelley modified the pattern by ending each of the five sections of the poem with a climactic couplet. In keeping with his Terza Rima stanza, he concentrates on the effects of the West Wind on three classes of objects: Leaves, Clouds, and Water. The combination of *Terza Rima* and the threefold effect of the West Wind provides the poem with a pleasing structural symmetry.

You should note that at around 1819, democracy was not making much progress in Europe. Readers and critics alike both seek to locate in Shelly's "West Wind" a liberating energy that would 'free' the common people from all sorts of bondages. Shelly expounds that if he had the power of the West Wind's mythical divinity, readers would read his poem and liberty will automatically prosper. As he writes:

> "Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!...
> Scatter…my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawakened earth
> The trumpet of a prophecy!" (Lines 61-69)

Although there remains a political undertone in this poem, you have seen that Shelley invokes the spirit of the West Wind in the true classical manner. The poet describes the activities of the West Wind in its two-fold capacities as destroyer and preserver.It blows so violently in the sky above as over the earth below. It causes a great upsurge in the sky and gives the signal of the approaching storm which is foreshadowed by the clouds scattered over all the

sky. The West Wind spreads the dark clouds from one end of the horizon to another and the sky resembles a tomb which is a sign of the advent of winter and the death of the year. The poet has compared withered leaves scattered by the West Wind to 'ghost from an enchanter fleeting.'And thus, Shelley also compares the West Wind as a magician who is unseen. "Ode to the West Wind" thus becomes one of the best examples of Shelley's poetic mind at work.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Tell briefly about the context in which the poem "Ode to the West Wind" was composed.

Q 2: What are the three fields of operation for the West Wind?

Q 3: Provide a very brief stanza wise summary of the poem.

Q 4: What is the significance of Shelly's use of Terza Rima in the poem "Ode to the West Wind"?

10.3.2 Major Themes

The following are some of the major themes of the poem "Ode to the West Wind."

The Poet as a Visionary:

In Shelley's poetry, the figure of the poet is not simply an entertainer or a moralist but a prophetic hero. The intimate connection with the natural world provides the poet with an access to profound cosmic truths. Thus, his poetry almost becomes a kind of prophecy, and through his words, he will try to change the world for a better future based on political, social, and spiritual change. Shelley's poet is a near-divine saviour, comparable to Prometheus and Christ often doomed to suffer as their visionary power isolated them from other common people. Finally, however, the poet triumphs because his art is immortal, outlasting the tyranny of government, religion, and society and living on to inspire new generations of people.

The Power of Nature:

Like many of the romantic poets Shelley demonstrates a great reverence for the beauty of nature, and feels closely connected to nature's hidden power. In his early poetry, Shelley shares the romantic interest in Pantheism—the belief that God, or a divine, unifying spirit, runs through everything in the universe. He refers to this unifying natural force in many poems, describing it as the "spirit of beauty" in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and identifying it with Mont Blanc and the Arve River in "Mont Blanc." This force is the cause of all human joy, faith, goodness, and pleasure, and it is also the source of poetic inspiration and divine truth. Shelley asserts several times that this force can influence people to change the world for the better. Nature destroys as often as it inspires or creates, and when it destroys, it does it cruelly and indiscriminately. For this reason, Shelley's delight in nature is mitigated by an awareness of its dark side.Sometimes, Nature in Shelley, far from being dead matter in motion, lives a life of her own. The cloud, thus, is not a mere mass of vapour hanging over the earth, but an active agent, bringing 'fresh showers for the thirsting flowers', bearing 'light shade for the leaves' and so on. That is why, Shelley prays to nature for help when he falls "upon the thorns of life". Finally, Nature to him is interfused with a Universal spirit which bursts in its beauty and its might from trees and beasts and men. It is therefore one of the many forms in which that spirit manifests itself.Of course, Shelley did not merely remain a worshipper of Nature in her simple and homely aspects, but turns to her awe-inspiring objects. In this poem, Shelley has presented the violence of the West Wind and the changeful glory of atmospheric effects, the terror of storms–those rare and awful manifestations of Nature when she puts on a supernatural grandeur.

Contemporary English Politics:

The poet desires the irresistible power of the wind to scatter the words he has written about his ideals and causes, one of which was opposition to Britain's monarchical government as a form of

tyranny. Believing firmly in democracy and individual rights, he supported movements to reform government. In 1819, England's nobility feared that working-class citizens– besieged by economic problems, including high food prices– would imitate the rebels of the French Revolution and attempt to overthrow the established order. On August 16, agitators attracted tens of thousands of people to a rally in St. Peter's Field, Manchester, to urge parliamentary reform and to protest laws designed to inflate the cost of corn and wheat. Nervous public officials mismanaged the unarmed crowd and ended up killing 11 protesters and injuring more than 500 others. In reaction to this incident, Shelley wrote *The Masque of Anarchy* in the fall of 1819 to urge further nonviolent action against the government. This work was not published during his lifetime. However, "Ode to the West Wind'', also written in the fall of 1819, was published a year later. The poem obliquely refers to his desire to spread his reformist ideas when it says, "Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!" Shelley believed that the poetry he wrote had the power to bring about political reform: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World'', he wrote in another work, *A Defence of Poetry*.



Shelly follows Dante's Terza Rima, in which the middle line of each tercet rhymes with the first and third line of the next tercet, with the modification that there are five numbered sections, and each section consists of four triplets followed by a couplet.

Shelly's Prophetic View of History:

The lines "If winter comes can spring be far behind" can be read as a manifestations of Shelly's prophetic views of history, Shelly viewed Europe as pummeled into lethargy, as the poet himself is in the poem. Shelly saw that the French Revolution which promised real liberation had failed; the holy alliance suppressed freedom everywhere. Tuscany (Italy) the birth place of the poem was suffering foreign rule, and in England, revolutionary laws and actions by a conservative Government were opposed by Shelly. He believed that tyranny ensures its own demise. The inevitability of self destruction of the evils of tyranny is the pacifist poet's ultimate self-inflicted retribution of tyranny. His is a prophecy of optimism but we all know that history is full of examples that Spring does not end in the cycles of Winter.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: State the important themes that are available in this poem?

Q 6: What is Pantheism? Do you think that Shelly successfully blends his pantheistic ideas in the poem "Ode to the West Wind'?

Q 7: How does the contemporary English politics inform the poem?

10.3.3 Shelly's Poetic Style

You must have already read that Shelly adopts the Terza Rima form in this poem which has helped the poet deal with the structure of the poem in a remarkable way. Shelley unifies the content of the poem by focusing the first three stanzas on the powers of the West Wind and the last two stanzas on the poet's wish to use these powers to spread his words throughout the world. If you notice the style of Shelly, you at once find an interesting rhyme scheme in this poem. Each stanza has three Tercets and a closing couplet. In poetry, a Tercet is a unit of three lines that usually contain end rhyme; a couplet is a two-line unit that usually contains end rhyme.In the following examples drawn from the second stanza of the poem however, line 2 of first Tercet rhymes with lines 1 and 3 of the next Tercet. Consider the first three Tercets of the second stanza. Notice that *shed* rhymes with *spread* and *head* and that *surge* rhymes with *verge* and *dirge*

"Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are **shed**,
Shook from the tangled boughs of heaven and ocean,"
(Lines 15-17)

"Angels of rain and lightning! there are **spread**
On the blue surface of thine airy **surge**,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the **head"** (Lines 18-20)
"Of some fierce Mænad, even from the dim **verge**
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,

The locks of the approaching storm. Thou **dirge"**

(Lines 21-23)

Another point to be noted is that all of the couplets in the poem rhyme, but the last couplet (lines 69-70) is an imperfect rhyme called Eye Rhyme.

"The trumpet of a prophecy! O **Wind**,
If winter comes, can Spring be far **behind**?" (Lines 69-70)

It occurs when the pronunciation of the last syllable of one line is different from the pronunciation of the last syllable of another line even though both syllables are identical in spelling except for a preceding consonant. For example, the following end-of-line word pairs would constitute eye rhyme: **wind** and **behind**.

You are already informed that Shelley's poetry offers a large variety of **images** in this poem. Cecil Day Lewis, in his *The Poetic Image* discussed Imagery in the following way: "The idea that imagery is at the core of the poem, that a poem may itself be an image composed from multiplicity of images, did not begin to have any wide official currency till the Romantic Movement. What do we understand by the poetic image? In its simplest terms, it is a picture made out of words. An epithet, a metaphor, a simile may create an image; or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or passage on the face of it purely descriptive, but conveying to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality. Every poetic image, therefore, is to some degree metaphorical. So, imagery, that is images taken collectively, is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature. Even at the cost of repetition and monotony, Shelley uses piles of images. **Mist, cloud, water, wind, air** and **fire** are the elements out of which most of his images are drawn. But the elements which are most dominant are **darkness, light, water** and **fire.** He has rightly been described as the poet of light par excellence and for him earthly light is only a part or faint copy of "the light whose smile kindles the universe." His other images are

'wing', 'quiver', 'soar', 'fly', 'panting', 'fainting' and **'singing'**. But, the major source of his imagery is Nature or its four elements.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What is an image, according to Cecil Day Lewis?

Q 9: How does Shelly integrate the images of nature in this poem?



10.4 LET US SUM UP

From the different sections of this unit, you have learnt that "Ode to the West Wind", by P. B. Shelley, was written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence in October 1819, and published in 1820. The ode is a passionate invocation to the spirit of the West Wind, both "Destroyer and Preserver." It is composed in five sweeping stanzaic movements, each taking the form of a sonnet, but with complex musical patterns of internal rhyme and run-on lines, culminating in a breathless series of cries or questions. The symbolism used in the poem is rich. Shelley intends to state that the Wind is the seasonal force of renewal in Nature; it is also the power that produces self-sacrifice (or self-destruction) in personal life. Besides, in this poem Shelly expressed his 'unextinguished' political hopes as well as the very passion of his aspiration and creativity as a poet. Shelley's minute observations of wind, water, wood, cloud, and sky combine imagery which is simultaneously scientific, mythical, and even biblical. The total effect of the poem finally can be seen in terms of the poet's transcendent hope and energy, achieved through suffering and despair.



10.6 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides2/Ode.html



10.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: The poem was conceived in a wood that skirts Arno, near Florence… …on a particular day a tempestuous wind was blowing followed by a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions… …so the poem came out of a specific experience.

Ans to Q No 2: The three parallel invocations of the West Wind are on the land, in the sky and on the sea… …the exact lines in the poem are "If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear;/ If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;/A wave to pant beneath thy power."

Ans to Q No 3: The **first** stanza describes how on earth the West Windhelps the seeds to sprout… … the **second** stanza explains how the violent West Windin the sky gives the signal of the approaching storm… …The **third** stanza addresses the West Wind as the spirit that affects the sea by stirring the tranquil surface of the Mediterranean… …in the **fourth** stanza, the poet appeals to the West Wind to animate him with its power… …in the **final** stanza the poet urges the wind to stimulate in him the power to sing the inspiring note of the coming millennium.

Ans to Q No 4: Terza Rima is the stanza form that Dante used in his *Divine Comedy*… …it is a series of triplets with interlocking rhymes, aba, bcb, cdc, etc…. …Shelley modified the pattern by ending each of the

five sections of the poem with a climactic couplet…. the combination of Terza Rima and the threefold effect of the West Wind provides the poem with a pleasing structural symmetry.

Ans to Q No 5: The visionary role of the poet… …the power of nature… …Shelly's concern over contemporary politics.

Ans to Q No 6: Pantheism is the belief that God, or a divine, unifying spirit, runs through everything in the universe… ... "Ode to the West Wind best represents Shelly's pantheistic thinking… …the West Wind destroys as often as it inspires or creates, and when it destroys, it does it cruelly and indiscriminately… …Shelley's assertion is that this force can influence people to change the world for the better.

Ans to Q No 7: Britain's monarchical government was seen as form of tyranny… …Believing firmly in democracy and individual rights, he supported movements to reform government… …Shelley believed that the poetry he wrote had the power bring about political reform… …the poem obliquely refers to his desire to spread his reformist ideas when it says, "Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind.

Ans to Q No 8: An image is a picture made out of words… …figures of speech like epithet, metaphor and simile may create an image… …an image may convey to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality.

Ans to Q No 9: His images are 'wing', 'quiver', 'soar', 'fly', 'panting', 'fainting' and 'singing'… …but the major source of his imagery is Nature or its elements like air, water, earth etc… …integration of all his images to signify his universal message… …through the images of Nature Shelley announces the theme of birth and rebirth.



10.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: In what ways does P.B. Shelly make connections between Nature and Art, and how does he illustrate such connections in "Ode to the West Wind"?

Q 2: Discuss Shelley's use of Nature imagery in "Ode to the West Wind".

Why does the poet call the West Wind, both a destroyer and a preserver?

Q 3: Comment on Shelly's use of the poetic persona as a reformer. What are the images he has used to signify that role?

Q 4: Do you think that Shelley uses too much figurative language in the "Ode to the West Wind"? What makes this ode different from any other type of Shellian lyric?

Q 5: How would you like to interpret the ideas of imagination and creativity in the context of this poem "Ode to the West Wind"?

Q 6: Comment on Shelley's integration of natural images into a vision of humanity and the Universe.

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