

## Explore the ways in which nature is presented in Ode to the West Wind by Shelley and the other poem.

A\*1 COMMENTS: - get to argument quickly in intro

- Include: Meter analysis? Ballad form analysis for rime?
- Include: Aestheticism/grand heroic visionary poet?

It is somewhat ironic that although Percy Shelley and Samuel Coleridge had profoundly different attitudes towards religion, they express similar sentiments towards nature in both *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (pt.1) and *Ode to the West Wind*. Shelley, having taken a keen interest in science at Eton College, was an assured atheist, resulting in his subsequent expulsion from Oxford University in 1811 following his anonymous publishing of "The Necessity of Atheism". Meanwhile Coleridge, considered a 1<sup>st</sup> generation Romantic as opposed to Shelley's 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, was abhorred by atheism. After a meeting with Charles Darwin in 1796, he reportedly said that "[Darwin] thinks in a new train in all subjects except religion." Therefore, whilst Coleridge's expression of nature contains religious sentimentalities, Shelley relies on personal, aesthetic influences. Nevertheless, within these two poems explicitly, nature is used as a metaphor, referencing both of their aforementioned viewpoints; it is expressed as a duality, often misunderstood by humanity and as having an eternal perpetual force.

In part 1 of 'Rime', nature is expressed as a metaphor for the liminal boundary between the mortal, temporal world, and the world of the divine and nature. The 'Albatross', a symbol of good luck and hope for sailors, is presented with notable divine references: the simile "as if it had been a Christian soul" implies the albatross is an allegorical reference to Christ, leading to the following biblical allegory: "The ice did split with a thunder fit". The cacophony in this line is almost onomatopoeic in its depiction of the ice cracking, whilst the verb 'split' itself could reference Jesus' splitting of the veil of the holy priests in order to allow no mediator between the people and God. Coleridge, much like Blake, believed that the people should not need a corrupted 'institution' to govern and regulate their relationship with God, hence the reference to this particular bible story. The biblical allegories in regard to 'the Albatross' juxtapose how it returns 'every day, for food or play'. The internal rhyme and (almost) monosyllabic phrase reference the mortal, mundane world and its 'merry minstrelsy'. Hence, the combination of these aspects refer to the Albatross, a representative of nature, as a metaphor for the liminal boundary between the temporal and divine world. The symbolic shooting of the bird, then, represents the Mariner's destruction of the link between man and nature, justifying the withdrawal of nature ('the silence') and the rejection of his fellow crewmen (with their 'cursed eye').

Meanwhile, Shelley uses the more personal metaphor for the West Wind and nature being a metaphor for his own poetic imagination. During his lifetime, Shelley received very little acclaim – many publishers were scared to hire him for fear of being labelled 'blasphemous' (a crime at the time). The fame we attribute to Shelley today developed posthumously. In stanza 4, Shelley writes "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." The repetition of the subjunctive phrases 'If I were' refer to the previous 3 stanzas chronologically: 'leaves' from stanza 1, 'cloud' from stanza 2 and 'wave' from stanza 3. His hyperbolic anaphora and use of the pronoun 'I' reflects his extreme desire to be at one with nature. He wishes the 'incantation of this verse'

to be as powerful and commanding of '[the wind's] power' and respect. Shelley believes Nature has a rejuvenating power, much like Wordsworth, that deserves worship (hence the desperate, hyperbolic repetition of 'o hear'), with the hope that it would restore his poetic capabilities and allow him to finally be rewarded for his work. The west wind is a metaphor for the poetic imagination Shelley desires.

Nature is also presented as having a dual nature, as a 'Destroyer and preserver'. In stanza 1, Shelley describes the tragic, decaying season of Autumn: "leaves dead/Are driven, like ghosts from an encounter fleeing." The simile 'like ghosts' implies a fantastical and mystical force of nature, suggesting it is transcendent of any mortal fathoming. The monosyllabic "leaves dead" reflects the dull monotony of decay and autumn which contrasts the dynamic verb in the passive phrase "are driven". The perpetual dynamism of the wind through the verb 'to drive' provides a sense of inevitability that change will come. In contrast, nature's duality is presented through the celebratory and joyful references to spring later in the same stanza: "Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air" – a pertinent comparison can be drawn from the repeated use of a simile, 'like flocks, this time providing a biblical allusion to the Shepherd's flocks (instead of the fantasmal 'ghosts' of earlier), whilst the dynamic verb of 'driving' has also sustained. The duality of nature is presented through the differing of natural imagery despite repetition of poetic techniques and consistency of the Terza Rima form. The duality in this sense is almost God-like, with the power to create and destroy life, heightened by the worshipful tone in stanza 2 that mirrors a psalm.

Similarly, the duality of nature in Rime is presented through the different expressions of the force of nature: "now the storm-blast came...and chased us south along." The sudden intrusion of the explosive sound, heightened by the adverb 'now', express the dynamic and unpredictable force of nature. The personification through the verb 'chased' could imply a sense of aggression. The personified verb 'overtaking' also implies an effortless in which nature, omnipotent, can overpower man. To contrast, in stanza 2, nature, again, easily overpowers man, however in a much more subtle way: "water, water everywhere...nor any drop to drink." The hyperbolic repetition of the noun 'water' suggests that despite nature's almost claustrophobic presence, its withdrawal retains as much of a forceful and detrimental effect on man as the power of its 'blast'. If the ship, here, acts as a microcosm of society, then the withdrawal of nature in such a subtle expression of force demonstrates the fragility of human society (heightened by the paradoxical comparison of 'everywhere' against 'nor any'). The duality of nature in this way exacerbates the realisation of man's futile attempt to resist its influence, perhaps Coleridge's criticism of industry and scientific development turning its back on nature.

Nature is also presented as having an eternal power on humanity as, demonstrated through the Mariner beginning his tale: The Mariner's first quote 'there was a ship' lacks any emotion or imagery, stated with monosyllables without exclamation. This immediately implies that the mariner is accustomed to telling this tale, and has likely been for a long time, as suggested by the adjective 'Ancient' in the title. The Mariner's punishment is eternal, implying an omnipotent nature that allows the mariner to simultaneously gain immortality yet also be trapped in it. Thus, the eternal power of nature overwhelms any humble power of man. Furthermore, nature's eternity is also shown through its very presence: "the ice was here, the ice was there, the ice was all around." The repetition presents a foreboding, claustrophobic impression of nature whilst the use of prepositions

show the vast expanse of nature, dwarfing the ship. To contrast, the repetition could also be a dramatic device for the performer to build atmosphere and tension through pathetic fallacy. Nature's eternal presence and influence serves as a warning against man's futile attempt to overcome or supplant it.

Shelley's presentation of eternal nature is shown through his presentation of memory: "In my boyhood...when to outstrip thy skiey speed/scarce seem'd a vision." Shelley depicts, here, his memory of his childish attempt to outrun or 'outstrip' the wind, yet that now seems futile, only a dream ('vision'). Here Shelley presents a very Wordsworthian sentiment of the child's proximity to the divine and nature, which is lost as one ages. His childish innocence allowed him to 'rival' the wind, rejuvenating and energising him. This rejuvenation Shelley 'sane[ly] needs' implying his desire to regress to childhood. Thankfully, his prayers are answered as he begins to express himself using short fragments and exclamations: "Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!" the imperative and dynamic verb represent his re-energising through memory and hence the successful utilisation of nature's eternal power. This poem was written shortly after Shelley suffered the tragic deaths of two of his children, Clara and Will, which could suggest that his Ode is as much an analysis of nature's influence on society as an auto-biographical desire for nature to restore his despondent mental state. The eternity of nature allows a temporary regression to childish innocence, providing Shelley with the energy and imagination to revive his poetry.

The Romantic era was perpetrated by radical philosophical thinkers such as Rousseau, famous for: "Man is born free but everywhere is in chains." Through this, nature can be seen as a representative of man's potential freedom, with its eternal power to reinvigorate and act as man's only tenable link to the divine. Yet, nature is presented as an overwhelming force that can destroy, impede or restrict man's efforts, serving as a warning to humanity. Yet, expressions of these ideals, the omnipotence and duality of nature show an evolution from the 'classical mindset' of nature to be seen only as something aesthetically pleasing or as a product of man. Nature is a symbol of freedom and potential destruction, an undeniable influence on mankind.