

SAMPLE ANALYSIS ON PERCY BYSSHE
SHELLEY'S 'ODE TO THE WEST
WIND'

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THESIS

Text: *Ode to the West Wind* (1819), Percy Byssche Shelley

Question

To what extent do you agree with the following proposition?

Shelley's manifold references to Christian themes including "Heaven", "prayer" and "new birth" throughout his 'Ode to the West Wind' betray his view that nature's "West Wind" is the instrument under which a divine creator directs the fate of mankind.

Thesis

Misguided is the proposition¹ that various references to Christian themes of "Heaven", "prayer" and "new birth" in *Ode to the West Wind* betrays² Shelley's belief in the "West Wind" as the will of a divine creator – given Shelley's staunch atheism made explicit in *A Refutation of Deism: in a Dialogue* (1814)³.

The presence of these theistic⁴ motifs is more aptly characterized as Shelley's employment of analogies intimate to his Christian contemporaries in an effort to persuade them of the inexorable power of nature to commence physical and political change – a phenomenon not to be confused with the will of a theistic god⁵.

¹ I am disagreeing with the question's proposition

² *betrays* - as in 'let something slip' or 'hint at'

³ Reference to another text by Shelley to demonstrate an understanding that Shelley rejects the existence of a god, so it would be very unlikely that Shelley would be claiming that the will of a 'divine creator' exists as suggested by the question.

⁴ *theistic* – relating to theism, which is the belief in the existence of a god, gods, or a creator intervening in the universe.

⁵ I am arguing that Shelley's reference to Christian themes was not the result of his belief in a god, but rather he did so to frame his atheistic argument that 'nature creates change' into terms that his theistic or Christian friends and community would better relate to.

KEY IDEA AND ANALYSIS

Key Idea 1

In the fifth canto *Shelley* glorifies the “West Wind” as an ardent¹ prophet proclaiming the seasonal phenomenon of inevitable prosperity following an epoch² of humankind suffering³.

¹ *ardent* – very enthusiastic or passionate

² *epoch* – a particular period of time in history or a person’s life

³ I mean to say that *Shelley* is praising the “West Wind”/Nature for joyfully reminding humankind that periods of prosperity will always follow from periods of suffering – in a manner akin to the passing of seasons throughout the year.

Analysis

With the perturbing Peterloo Massacre of August 1819 no doubt in mind, in the fifth canto of *Ode to the West Wind* *Shelley* praises the “West Wind” as an ardent prophet under which *Shelley* is impelled to proclaim like a “lyre” in song the seasonal phenomenon of inexorable prosperity that follows humankind’s epochs of “sadness”. In the final stanza of this canto *Shelley* resumes his theistic motif in a metaphorical glorification of the “[West] Wind” as a “trumpet” playing the “prophecy” of a “Spring [that does not follow] far behind” the seasonal human suffering symbolised by “Winter”. In his jubilation with Nature’s heralding of the comforting seasonal cycle of human prosperity and suffering – expressed by analogy to a theistic prophet – *Shelley* invites his reader to – in periods of great suffering like the then recent Peterloo Massacre – place faith not in a god, but in Nature’s cyclical remedies.