



England in 1819

1819 was a remarkable year for Percy Bysshe Shelley in many ways: it was the year of the Ode to the West Wind and of the so-called Peterloo Massacre (→ 4.3), a watershed in English political history. Shelley, exiled in Italy but following the news from England, summarised his nation's ills in the following sonnet.

Percy Bysshe Shelley
The Poetical Works of
Percy Bysshe Shelley
(1839)

An old, mad, blind, despised¹ and dying King:
Princes, the dregs² of their dull³ race, who flow
Through public scorn⁴, – mud from a muddy spring⁵;
Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,
5 But leech-like⁶ to their fainting country cling⁷
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow⁸;
A people starved and stabbed on the untilled field⁹;
An army which liberticide and prey¹⁰
Makes¹¹ as a two-edged¹¹ sword to all who wield¹²;
10 Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay¹³;
Religion Christless, Godless – a book sealed¹⁴;
A Senate, Time's worst statute¹⁵ unrepealed¹⁶, –
Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

1 mad ... despised. Pazzo (si riferisce alla pazzia di re Giorgio III), cieco, disprezzato.

2 dregs. Feccia (riferimento al principe reggente, il futuro Giorgio IV).

3 dull. Ottusa.

4 scorn. Disprezzo.

5 muddy spring. Sorgente fangosa.

6 leech-like. Come sanguisughe.

7 cling. Si aggrappano.

8 blow. Colpo.

9 stabbed ... field. Punalato in un campo incolto (riferimento al massacro di Peterloo del 1819).

10 liberticide ... Makes. Fa liberticidio e bottino.

11 two-edged. A doppio taglio.

12 wield. Brandiscono.

13 slay. Massacrano.

14 sealed. Sigillato.

15 Time's worst statute. Il peggior statuto di tutti i tempi (riferimento alla legge che escludeva i non anglicani dai pubblici uffici).

16 unrepealed. Non abrogato.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

1 **READ** the text and identify the two sections. Then write a heading for each section.

2 **LOOK** at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents and answer the questions.

.....

..... Why are the people of line 7 pictured as 'starved and stabbed'?

..... Why is it said to be both 'liberticide and prey'?

.....

..... What is the role of the 'Phantom'?

.....

.....

graves What do these two words point out?

**3 DISCUSS** the following questions in pairs.

- 1 Who does the poet address?
- 2 Who is the 'old, mad, blind, despised and dying King' (line 1)?
- 3 Who/what is the subject of the verb 'Are' in line 13?
- 4 Pick out all the linguistic images which Shelley employs for political exponents and institutions. Then write them down in the grid below.

King →

Princes →

Rulers →

Army →

Senate →

Laws →

Religion →

- 5 Which expressions does Shelley use for English people?

- 6 What is the tone of the whole sonnet?

- 7 What is the role of the poet?

4 COMPLETE the summary with the words from the box.

scorn	revolution	despised	religion	political	corrupt	interests
oppressed	Massacre	liberty	attacks	protect	hope	Catholics



England in 1819 is a **(1)** sonnet written as a response to the brutal Peterloo **(2)** in August 1819.

The poem **(3)** England, as the poet sees it, decadent and ruled by a king, George III, who is dying, old, blind, insane, and **(4)** His sons, the 'leech-like' princes, are objects of public **(5)** and his ministers run the country for their own selfish **(6)**

The people are hungry, **(7)** and hopeless. Meanwhile, the army is **(8)** : it is used to destroy **(9)** and collect booty. The laws are harsh and useless because they are manipulated to **(10)** the rich and enchain the poor. **(11)** is in a state of apathy and Parliament denies Roman **(12)** their civil rights. But out of this unhappy state of affairs, the last two lines express the **(13)** that a 'glorious Phantom', a **(14)** , may spring from this decay and 'illumine our tempestuous day' by destroying all wrongs.

5 FIND similarities and differences between Byron (→ 4.13) and Shelley as regards political activity, reputation, life abroad, attitude to democracy, key ideas of their works. Write not more than 10 lines.**6 REFER** to the Romantic writers you have studied and write a short essay (20 lines) about the topic of rebellion. Remember that central in works about rebellion is the sense of powerful external forces – the state, the Church, tradition – which can be obeyed only at the expense of conscience and humanity.