

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives
England in 1819 – *Percy Bysshe Shelley*

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ENGLAND IN 1819

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Brief Summary

Shelley presents a savage **critique** of England's political and social condition in 1819. He **condemns** the **monarchy**, **government**, and **institutions** as corrupt, oppressive, and morally bankrupt, arguing that the suffering of ordinary people is the result of failed leadership. Despite the bleak portrayal, the poem ends with a fragile sense of hope: from decay and oppression, change and **renewal** may eventually grow.

Synopsis

- The poem opens with a harsh description of the King as weak, corrupt, and nearing death.
- The speaker then **criticises** the princes, presenting them as morally degraded rulers.
- The speaker describes England as exhausted and suffering under the weight of its leadership.
- The **focus shifts** to the people, who are shown as starving, oppressed, and silenced.
- The army is presented as a force that turns against the population instead of protecting it.
- The laws of the nation are **condemned** as deadly rather than morally just or protective.
- The Church is criticised for lacking true **spiritual authority** or moral guidance.
- The poem concludes by suggesting that these **decaying institutions** may become the foundation for change.
- The final image implies that hope and **renewal** could emerge from the collapse of the existing system.

Context

Romanticism and Political Radicalism

Shelley was a key figure in the **Romantic** movement, which valued emotion, imagination, and moral truth. Shelley used his poetry to challenge **social injustice** and expose **political corruption**. *England in 1819* is a passionate critique of the ruling classes, portraying the monarchy, government, army, law, and Church as oppressive.

The Peterloo Massacre

An important historical context for the poem is the **Peterloo Massacre**, which took place on 16 August 1819 in St. Peter's Field, Manchester. Thousands of **peaceful protestors** had gathered to demand electoral reform, yet the army was deployed to disperse them. Eleven people were killed, and over four hundred were injured, showing the **brutality** of the authorities and the **vulnerability** of ordinary people. Shelley responded to Peterloo by writing



poems that expressed **outrage** at the violence and injustice, including *England in 1819*, which contains subtle **allusions** to the massacre.

Political and Social Conditions



In 1819, **King George III** was elderly, mentally unwell, and near death. His son, the Prince Regent (later George IV), had been effectively governing in his father's incapacity but was largely uninterested in responsible leadership. Voting was **limited** to a small proportion of men, no women had the vote, and many citizens lived in poverty and hunger. The poem reflects this **imbalance of power**, portraying rulers as detached and morally **corrupt**, and citizens as oppressed and suffering.

Publication and Risk

Shelley wrote *England in 1819* between September and December 1819 and sent it to his friend Leigh Hunt. He did not expect it to be published, recognising the **dangers of openly criticising** the monarchy and established institutions. The poem's bold **denunciations** of the ruling classes, combined with references to events such as Peterloo, would have made publication politically risky.

The title 'England in 1819'

By naming *England*, Shelley makes the poem a national accusation rather than a personal complaint. The problems described are systemic, not individual.

England in 1819

The date *1819* anchors the poem firmly in its political context and freezes England at this moment in time. It signals that the poem responds to real events (including unrest, poverty, and state violence).

Unlike Romantic titles that suggest beauty or reflection, this blunt, factual title mirrors the poem's harsh, uncompromising tone.

Perspective and Tone

The poem is written in the **third person**, giving Shelley distance from the events and allowing him to speak with authority and **moral certainty**. Rather than personal reflection, the voice functions as a **public condemnation**, positioning the speaker as a social and political critic. The **tone** is bitter, accusatory, and furious, particularly in the opening lines, where the monarchy and ruling classes are attacked without restraint. However, this anger is not



uncontrolled; it is purposeful and directed. In the final **couplet**, the **tone shifts** subtly towards cautious hope, suggesting that from the decay of corrupt institutions, the possibility of renewal and change may emerge. This movement from rage to **guarded optimism** reinforces Shelley's belief that exposing injustice is the first step towards **transformation**.



England in 1819

Asyndetic listing intensifies condemnation. Caesurae create a harsh, accusatory rhythm. Decay imagery presents leadership as morally unfit. Political power is linked to weakness and failure.

Tricolon highlights detachment from the people. Sensory deprivation suggests moral blindness and failure to show empathy.

Violent imagery foreshadows unrest. Blood suggests both guilt and sacrifice. Collapse appears inevitable.

“Liberticide” = killing freedom. Violence harms both rulers and citizens.

“Sanguine” = blood-red, evokes violence, death, and moral corruption.

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;

Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow

Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring;

Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,

But leechlike to their fainting country cling

Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow.

A people starved and stabbed in th' untilled field;

An army, whom liberticide and prey

Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;

Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;

Metaphor suggests corruption and waste. Dehumanising language removes dignity from rulers.

Extended metaphor of pollution and decay. Repetition of “muddy” emphasises moral filth—power is shown to contaminate society.

Simile presents rulers as parasites. “Fainting” implies national exhaustion and hunger. Exploitation of the vulnerable.

Alliteration sharpens violence. “Starved” foregrounds poverty and neglect. “Untilled field” suggests wasted potential and unrest.

Metaphor of army as “two-edged sword” suggests it harms both the people and those in power who use it. Role reversal— the army, traditionally a symbol of defence, is shown attacking its own population.

Colour symbolism: wealth and blood. Law associated with greed and violence.



Religious imagery used to condemn hypocrisy. Institutional faith shown as morally empty. Betrayal of spiritual values. Caesura creates a heavy, relentless rhythm which reflects the weight of oppression.

This final couplet is a metaphor of rebirth from death.

“**Phantom**” represents a hopeful but uncertain future change (political, moral, or social) that may arise from England’s decay. Violence gives way to possibility of change.

Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;

A senate, Time’s worst statute, unrepealed—

Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may

Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

Personification of Time as a judge. Political stagnation criticised. Refusal to change leads to decay. Disrupted rhyme scheme mirrors the disorder.

‘Tempestuous’ reinforces chaos in England; imagery implies renewal will dispel corruption.

Structure

Sonnet form with variations

- The poem is a **sonnet** (14 lines, mostly **iambic pentameter**) but Shelley deliberately alters the rhyme scheme (ababab cdcd ccdd). This breaks the expected **octave—sestet** patterns, reflecting the disorder and moral chaos of England in 1819.

Progression reflects disorder

- Shelley structures the poem to move from the monarchy → princes → parliament → army → laws → Church. Each **institutional attack** is condensed into short, impactful phrases, creating a **relentless, accumulative rhythm**.
- The mid-section (where the rhyme scheme shifts) emphasises the moral and social disruption he critiques.

Final couplet of hope

- The closing two lines return to a more **recognisable rhyming couplet**, providing resolution. This structural return mirrors the **cautious optimism** of the “**glorious Phantom**” emerging from decay, offering a sense of closure after sustained chaos.



Language and Imagery

Asyndetic Listing

The opening line's **asyndetic** list ("**old, mad, blind, despised, and dying**") intensifies condemnation and creates a rapid, breathless effect.

Metaphor and Simile

Rulers described as "**leech-like**" emphasise **parasitic exploitation**. The army as a "**two-edged sword**" conveys the danger of power turned against the people.

Colour Imagery

"**Golden and sanguine laws**" **contrast** wealth with blood, highlighting moral corruption and the dual nature of institutions that "**tempt and slay.**"

Violent and Moral Lexis

Words like "**starved,**" "**stabbed,**" "**blind in blood**" present England as suffering and exploited, evoking sympathy and moral outrage.



Final Couplet

"**Glorious Phantom**" suggests hope and regeneration; "**burst**" conveys sudden action, "**tempestuous day**" signals ongoing chaos being illuminated.

Themes

Abuse of Power

Shelley presents the monarchy, princes, parliament, army, laws, and Church as deeply **corrupt**. He shows that those in power **exploit** the country for personal gain, suggesting that absolute authority inevitably leads to moral and social decay. The poem portrays corruption as **systemic**, highlighting that the problem is rooted in institutions, not just individuals.

Social Injustice and Oppression

The poem vividly depicts the suffering of ordinary citizens, particularly in lines referencing those "**starved and stabbed in th' untilled field**". Shelley critiques an army that enforces oppression rather than protection, and laws that favour the wealthy over the poor. He presents social injustice as both widespread and **morally indefensible**.



Decay and Mortality

Imagery of dying kings, leech-like rulers, and “**graves**” for institutions emphasises decline and mortality. Shelley links the physical decay of leaders to the **degeneration** of social and political structures, reinforcing the idea that corruption erodes both power and society.



Hope and Renewal

Despite the harsh critique, Shelley introduces hope in the closing lines with the image of a “**glorious Phantom**” rising from decay. This suggests that even in times of extreme moral decay, there is potential for **regeneration, social reform**, and the creation of a fairer society.

Moral Responsibility and Conscience

The poem emphasises the need for ethical awareness and **moral action**. By exposing **institutional injustice** and human suffering, Shelley implies that citizens have a **responsibility** to recognise wrongdoing and work towards social change.

Comparisons

Lines Written in Early Spring- William Wordsworth

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both Wordsworth and Shelley are Romantic poets who criticise humanity’s moral failings. In <i>Lines Written in Early Spring</i>, Wordsworth laments “what man has made of man,” reflecting the loss of moral and spiritual harmony. Similarly, Shelley’s description of a “mad, blind, and dying King” highlights corruption and decay in political leadership. Both poets express hope for renewal: Wordsworth through faith in the moral and harmonious order of nature, Shelley through the “glorious Phantom” that may emerge from societal collapse. Each poet uses vivid imagery to engage the reader morally, presenting external realities – nature or political institutions – as a mirror for human action.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wordsworth’s tone is gentle, reflective, and mournful, while Shelley’s tone is furious, accusatory, and revolutionary. Wordsworth focuses on personal and spiritual reflection, whereas Shelley’s poem is overtly political, addressing the monarchy, army, laws, and Church.



Shall Earth No More Inspire Thee – Emily Brontë

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both Brontë and Shelley explore decline and deterioration. In Brontë's poem, lines such as "<i>The heart is like the earth / Whose riches have been spent</i>" evoke spiritual and emotional exhaustion, comparable to Shelley's depiction of political and social decay in "<i>An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King</i>". Both poets use intense, emotive language to provoke reflection. Brontë's imagery of lifelessness and loss mirrors Shelley's vivid depictions of oppression and the "<i>starved and stabbed</i>" populace, encouraging moral engagement.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shelley's focus is outward, critiquing institutions and societal structures, while Brontë's is inward, exploring the decay of individual spirit and inspiration. For example, Brontë laments the fading of creative and emotional vitality, rather than societal injustice. Brontë's tone remains melancholic and reflective throughout, with no suggestion of redemption, in contrast to Shelley's cautious hope in the final couplet: "<i>a glorious Phantom may / Burst,</i>" Brontë's imagery is often natural and metaphorical ("<i>The heart is like the earth</i>"), whereas Shelley's is political and historical, linking figures like George III and the army to moral and social collapse.

In a London Drawing Room – George Eliot

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both Eliot and Shelley contrast moral decay with an ideal or virtuous alternative. Eliot's description of "<i>stiff brocades, rigid trees, and cold reflections</i>" evokes a lifeless, constrained urban environment, much as Shelley presents a decaying monarchy and corrupt institutions in "<i>An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King</i>". Both draw attention to inequality and oppression. Eliot highlights social hierarchies and restrictive conventions, while Shelley depicts the suffering of the populace, especially the "<i>people starved and stabbed</i>", emphasising widespread injustice.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shelley's poem is politically urgent and revolutionary, directly condemning the monarchy, army, and Church, whereas Eliot's poem is reflective and observational, critiquing social restrictions in a more subtle, resigned manner (e.g. "<i>faces cold and motions measured</i>") Shelley addresses national and systemic issues with broad societal implications, while Eliot focuses on intimate social environments, showing how daily life and manners reflect moral shortcomings.



With Birds You're Never Lonely – Raymond Antrabus

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both Antrabus and Shelley use imagery to suggest hope and guidance. Shelley's "<i>glorious Phantom</i>" presents the potential for societal regeneration, while Antrabus' birdsong symbolises comfort, emotional support, and personal resilience. • Both explore human needs for reflection through external symbols. Shelley uses political and social imagery to critique morality, whereas Antrabus uses natural imagery to explore emotional healing and memory.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelley focuses on collective injustice and moral responsibility, addressing societal structures, while Antrabus centres on personal experience, memory, and the emotional solace offered by the natural world. • Shelley's tone is urgent, angry, and accusatory, whereas Antrabus' tone is calm, reflective, and consoling, creating a sense of personal rather than political restoration.

