

England in 1819



POEM TEXT

- 1 An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,—
- 2 Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
- 3 Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring,—
- 4 Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
- 5 But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
- 6 Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,—
- 7 A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field,—
- 8 An army, which liberticide and prey
- 9 Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield,
- 10 Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
- 11 Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;
- 12 A Senate,—Time's worst statute unrepealed,—
- 13 Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
- 14 Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

George III and an infamous massacre of political protesters—it voices Shelley's outrage at his country's corruption, but also insists that this decay could offer hope for a phoenix-like rebirth. England might be in terrible disorder, the poem argues, but the collapse of the old system of monarchical rule is also the chance for a visionary new beginning.

The poem's vision of chaos and corruption in English politics at first seems almost apocalyptic: it depicts the country as broken from top to bottom. The speaker views England's leaders as decrepit, out-of-touch parasites—rulers unqualified to rule.

The opening specifically attacks King George III, who at the time was mentally ill, blind, and on the verge of death. In the speaker's view, his blindness is [metaphorical](#) as well as literal: he can't understand or guide his country. The speaker also denounces lesser "princes" and "rulers"—George III's descendants and the rest of the aristocracy—as corrupt products of a corrupt source ("mud from a muddy spring"), suggesting that England's entire leadership is illegitimate and worthy of "scorn."

Moreover, the speaker accuses these leaders of being indifferent to the suffering around them, comparing them to leeches who feed off their deteriorating country. Instead of healing the country (as leeches were once thought to help heal patients), they're just making it sicker as they indulge themselves.

Regular "people," meanwhile, are wounded victims in an "untilled field," unable to cultivate themselves or their land. The speaker accuses the army of ruthlessly subjugating these people, and similarly portrays England's "laws," "religion," and "senate" (parliament) as utterly corrupt and unable to help anyone.

The poem shows an unstable society reaching a breaking point, where either violent revolution or some other form of drastic change is inevitable. Yet rather than spelling doom, this total brokenness creates the potential for redemption to arise. England's crises have destroyed it so thoroughly, the poem suggests, that they may actually cause a "glorious" national rejuvenation.

In its final moments, the poem states that all the disasters it's listed so far "are graves." In other words, they're markers of the country's death—but as in religious and mythical stories of souls rising from the grave, they're also potential sites of cultural rebirth. The speaker doesn't describe what this rebirth might look like, but mystically envisions a "glorious Phantom" emerging from the crisis to redeem England's suffering. Imagining that this spirit will "illumine our tempestuous day," the speaker expresses hope that the end of this stormy period could mark the beginning of a brighter one.



SUMMARY

The speaker lists a series of crises England faces in 1819: a king who is old, insane, unable to see the world around him, hated by his country, and about to die. Princes, who are the worst of their mediocre family line, flowing like dirty water from a dirty well through the public's contempt. Rulers who don't understand or care about England's problems, but instead help themselves at the country's expense, like leeches feeding off a fainting body until they die of overindulgence. Ordinary people who are starving and violently repressed on land that's not being farmed. An army that kills freedom and attacks its own people. Greed-driven, violent laws that corrupt and kill. A version of Christian religion that offers no meaning, like a holy book sealed shut. A parliament that's like the worst law ever passed but still remains in force. The speaker compares all these problems to graves from which a glorious, redeeming spirit might arise, turning a turbulent time into a calm and enlightened one.



THEMES



NATIONAL DESTRUCTION AND REBIRTH

Shelley's "England in 1819" is a furious indictment of a nation in turmoil. Written during a year of upheaval in England—including the decline of the mentally ill King

In its nightmare portrait of English society, "England in 1819" expresses Shelley's radical rage against his country's political machine. It's an outpouring of frustration, but it refuses to settle for despair. Instead it turns, at the last minute, to a vision of cautious hope—one that has outlived the specific crises that inspired the poem.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,—

The poem begins abruptly, launching without preface into a list of England's problems. The list is so long and breathless with outrage that the sentence's main verb ("Are") doesn't arrive until line 13! Shelley didn't even title the poem; it acquired the title "England in 1819" when it was posthumously published in 1839 (in a volume edited by the poet's wife, Mary Shelley).

The list starts with an attack on King George III, sometimes remembered as "Mad King George." At the time, George was 81 years old, clinically insane after years of deteriorating mental health, completely blind after years of deteriorating eyesight, and on the verge of death. (Shelley wrote the poem in December 1819; the King died the following month.) Due to his worsening mental illness, the Prince of Wales (the future George IV) had effectively replaced him as England's leader in 1811; George III retained his power in title only.

These conditions explain Shelley's description of the king as "old," "mad," "blind," and "dying." As for "despised," that's Shelley's opinion, but while George's popularity had fluctuated over the course of his lifetime, there's no doubt that his reign had been controversial. For example, he had presided over the loss of the American colonies during the American Revolution decades earlier. More immediately, the political conflicts of 1819, especially the [Peterloo Massacre](#) referenced in lines 7-9, had left much of England outraged at the monarchy and aristocracy (more on that massacre later on in this guide).

Also note that the word "blind" here has a [metaphorical](#) as well as literal meaning. Shelley suggests that the King (as one of the "Rulers" in line 4 who don't "see," "feel," or "know") can't perceive or understand his country well enough to lead it properly.

The [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) of heavy /d/ sounds, plus the appearance of hard /b/, /p/, and /k/ sounds, underscore the poet's anger:

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,—

The [assonance](#) of long /i/ sounds in "blind," "despised," and "dying" adds to the line's rhythmic intensity.

Finally, this poem is a [sonnet](#), and follows the standard sonnet [meter](#) of [iambic](#) pentameter (meaning there are five iambs, poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm) per line. But from the start, the speaker plays with that expected meter, slotting a [spondee](#) (DUM-DUM) into the second foot:

An old, | mad, blind, | despised, | and dy- | ing king,—

These extra stressed beats and sonic devices all combine to create an explosive start to a politically explosive poem.

LINES 2-3

*Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring,—*

The next targets of Shelley's outrage are the "Princes" of England. In 1819, King George III had seven living male heirs, or princes. These included the Prince of Wales, who, since 1811, had been running the country on behalf of the mentally ill king. (George also had five living daughters, or princesses.)

Lines 2-3 indicate that the Princes are no better than their father:

- "Dregs" are impurities in a liquid such as water or wine; [metaphorically](#), they're the worst elements of something.
- Shelley brands the princes as the worst of their "dull race," with "dull" meaning "stupid" or "mediocre" and "race" most likely meaning "family lineage." ("Race" could also refer to English people in general, although given Shelley's sympathy for the "people"—see line 7—it's unlikely that he intends to call his whole country stupid. His scorn here is directed at the hereditary aristocracy that produces England's rulers.)
- In Shelley's metaphor, these Princes are like "dregs" or "mud" in water from a source that is itself impure. The [polyptoton](#) of "mud"/"muddy" emphasizes just how dirty or tainted this metaphorical water is.
- The speaker imagines them "flow[ing] through public scorn," like a polluted river flowing through a country disgusted by it.
- Basically, he's calling the whole royal line worthless and despised.

Again, there's a lot of [alliteration](#) and consonance in these lines, particularly on hard consonant sounds such as /p/ and /d/ and on the hissed, [sibilant](#) /s/:

Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring,—

There's also plenty of [assonance](#) on the short /uh/ sound in "dull," "public," "mud," "from," and "muddy"—a vowel sound often associated in English with coarse or unpleasant things (think "ugly," "slug," "dumb," "scum," "flub," "thud," etc.)

Note, too, the number of consonant-heavy, monosyllabic words, such as "dregs," "scorn," and "spring," as well as the three [caesuras](#) (mid-line grammatical pauses) after "Princes," "race," and "scorn." Together, these effects make the verse slow and harsh: tough to say aloud and unpleasant to hear. This sound fits the image of slow, muddy, disgusting water.

LINES 4-6

*Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,—*

After insulting the king and princes, the speaker attacks the country's "Rulers" in general. This is a broad attack on the English aristocracy, whom the speaker views as unqualified, insensitive, and self-indulgent. He depicts them not as leaders but as parasites deepening England's misery.

Like the "king" in line 1, who is literally as well as [metaphorically](#) "blind," these rulers don't "see" the world around them—or "feel" or "know" it, either. They're inhumane and ignorant, concerned only with their own well-being. The speaker compares their greed to that of *leeches*: parasitic worms who drink blood.

- There's a layer of [irony](#) in the comparison, since leeches were commonly used at the time for medicinal purposes. The practice of "bloodletting" was believed to treat a variety of ailments, but it was generally ineffective and sometimes actively harmful to the patient.
- Here the "leech-like" rulers who should be healing their troubled country are harming it instead. They fatten themselves while England is "fainting" (losing strength as it's bled of resources, or dying altogether).

The speaker extends the [simile](#) by claiming that these rulers indulge themselves "Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow." In other words, they die of overindulgence, like leeches so gorged with blood that they simply drop off their victims' body. This grotesque image highlights what the speaker views as the grotesqueness of England's class system and hereditary aristocracy. "Without a blow" emphasizes that no one is swatting away these pests (punishing these corrupt rulers). Their victim, England, is too weak to fight back.

Note that these lines are again thick with [alliteration](#): "neither"/"nor"/"know," "leech-like," "country cling," "blind"/"blood"/"blow." These repeated consonants—a mix of nasal /n/, hard /c/, bold /b/, and liquid /l/ sounds—add up to a

sound that's nearly as unpleasant as the image it's describing. Readers can almost hear the verse dripping with contempt as it drives its message home. The multiple [caesuras](#) in lines 4 and 6 also slow the verse down, forcing the reader to linger over its unpleasantness (rather than turning away, as the rulers themselves do).

LINES 7-9

*A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field,—
An army, which liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield,*

After the broad attack on king, princes, and aristocracy in lines 1-6, the poem shifts its focus to the country's other people and institutions. This content shift is mirrored by a shift in the poem's [rhyme scheme](#). The poem's first six lines followed the pattern:

ABABAB

They alternated between "-ing" and "-ow" rhyme sounds. But here, those rhyme sounds shift. The new rhyme sounds will be "-ield" and "-ay"; the scheme for the next three lines can thus be written:

CDC

This shift in sound reflects the fact that the speaker moves from talking about rulers to the people they rule. Lines 7-9 specifically [allude](#) to the "Peterloo Massacre":

- For a while, England had been suffering an economic downturn that included bad harvests, low employment, and high bread prices. When protesters met in St. Peter's Field (Manchester) in 1819 to demand political and economic reform, British cavalry charged them with sabers, causing 18 deaths and many other casualties. The incident became known as the "Peterloo Massacre."
- The poem's description of "A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field" summarizes these events, evoking both the protesters stabbed at St. Peter's Field and hungry farmworkers in uncultivated ("untilled") fields.

Lines 8-9 criticize the "army" that perpetrated the massacre, accusing it of "liberticide" (the destruction of liberty) and of "prey[ing]" on England. These lines also warn that this army is "a two-edged sword to all who wield [it]": in other words, the rulers who've turned it against the people will likely find the violence turned back on themselves. (Shelley may or may not have known that some commemorative medals manufactured after the Massacre quoted Psalm 37:14: "The wicked have drawn out the sword, they have cast down the poor and needy...")

The sharp alliteration of "starved and stabbed" underscores the violence the line describes. Also note tht "Liberticide" was a

fairly new word at the time; it seems to have originated during the [French Revolution](#) of the 1780s and '90s, a rebellion that Shelley hoped to see mirrored in England.

LINES 10-12

*Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;
A Senate,—Time's worst statute unrepealed,—*

In lines 10-12, the speaker attacks England's laws, religion, and parliament—in other words, both church and state.

The adjectives "golden" and "sanguine" can have positive [connotations](#): the first can mean everything from "literally made of gold" to "superb," while the second can mean "cheerfully optimistic." However, in the context of this sharply critical line, their main connotations are negative. (Any secondary, positive connotations should be read [ironically](#): whatever good these laws promise, they don't deliver.)

- "Golden" implies a link with money and greed—things that corrupt laws. It might even echo the "golden calf" worshiped as a false idol in the Bible. (The Israelites create the calf while Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments; essentially, gold tempts them away from God's laws.)
- Meanwhile, "sanguine" can mean "blood-red," "bloody," or "bloodthirsty." Here, it implies that England's laws cause violence.
- Both kinds of laws "tempt and slay," corrupting their beneficiaries and killing their victims. (Notice the brief use of [personification](#), as if these powerful laws have a will of their own.)

Having attacked the laws themselves, the speaker then attacks the institutions that deal with divine and state law: "Religion" and the "Senate."

- The speaker describes "Religion," or at least the English version of it, as "Christless" and "Godless"—empty of the values Christianity claims to uphold.
- The speaker then compares it to "a book sealed," unable to offer wisdom. (This might refer generically to a closed Bible or other holy book, but probably also [alludes](#) to the biblical Book of Revelation, in which the opening of a sealed book reveals a prophetic vision to John of Patmos. Thus, the poem is suggesting that religion has yet to reveal any truth.) Shelley was a public atheist, but here he seems to be emphasizing the hypocrisy rather than the falsity of religion.

As for "A Senate," this refers to the British Parliament, which the speaker calls "Time's worst statute unrepealed."

[Metaphorically](#), and [hyperbolically](#), the speaker is comparing this lawmaking body to a law (statute) that's never been overturned (repealed) despite being the worst of all time. In other words, it's another problem England can't seem to get rid of.

The pile-up of negative adjectives ("Golden," "sanguine," "Christless," "Godless," "worst") and verbs ("tempt," "slay") conveys the vehemence of the speaker's outrage. Lines 11 and 12 feature quick, insulting descriptions after a dash, similar to "mud from a muddy spring" in line 3. This effect adds to the poem's concision and gives it a flavor of spontaneity, as if the speaker is coming up with put-downs on the spot. In a sense, the whole poem consists of these kinds of "quick takes" on England's crises. It's a brief, devastating summary of a time and place.

LINES 13-14

*Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.*

Lines 13-14 conclude the [sonnet](#) with a rhyming [couplet](#). Whereas the overall [rhyme scheme](#) of the poem suggests an inverted *Italian sonnet*—with a sestet (6-line unit) followed by an octave (8-line unit)—a closing couplet is more typical of an *English sonnet*. It offers a strong sense of closure, and can be thought of as the poem's turn, or *volta*—the moment when the poetic argument suddenly shifts. In this case, it drives home the unexpected note of hope on which the speaker chooses to end the poem.

The poem consists of a single sentence whose main verb has so far been withheld. Finally, it arrives in line 13, as the speaker announces that all the problems listed in lines 1-12 "Are graves." For a moment it seems as if the speaker believes that these crises spell the death of England. But then comes an unexpected shift: from these graves, the speaker says, "a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day."

The speaker doesn't say what the Phantom is—or how, when, or why it will appear—but seems to envision a redeeming or revolutionary spirit that might emerge from all these national disasters. Perhaps it's a spirit of liberty, as represented by its own liberation from the grave. Perhaps it's meant to evoke some of the resurrections of religion and myth, such as the resurrected Jesus in the Gospels or the [phoenix](#) that rises from the ashes in Greek/Egyptian folklore. (Both are frequently depicted as radiant figures, the kind who could "illumine" the surrounding darkness.) Some critics have linked it to the visionary appearances and resurrections of the apocalyptic Book of Revelation, which the speaker [alluded](#) to in line 11 ("a book sealed").

Regardless, this "glorious" image offers hope during a "tempestuous" (stormy) time, while leaving the nature of that hope to the reader's imagination.

The forceful [enjambment](#) in these lines places added emphasis on "may" and, especially, on "Burst." These emphases highlight the uncertainty of the hope that the speaker is expressing (the phantom *may* arrive, or it may not), as well as the suddenness and strength with which it might *burst* forth.

Note the [alliteration](#) of hard /g/ sounds, linking the "graves" of England's institutions with future "glorious[ness]," for example. There's also [consonance](#) of /m/, /s/, and /t/ sounds here:

Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestous day.

Taken together, the sounds of these lines add urgency, energy, and intensity to the poem's final moments.



SYMBOLS



MUDDY WATER

In lines 2-3, the speaker imagines the "Princes" as "mud" from a "muddy spring" (a well, brook, stream, etc.). The muddy water here [symbolizes](#) the harmful nature of the monarchy.

First, the speaker is suggesting that these Princes are as disgusting to their country as putrid water. Thus he describes them as "dregs" (impurities in liquid, or, figuratively, the worst elements of something) "flow[ing] through public scorn." The Princes—whom the speaker clearly considers unqualified to lead—are sickening and harming their country, rather than nourishing it as pure water or good leaders would.

In calling them "mud from a muddy spring," the speaker further implies that these unimpressive Princes have an equally unimpressive *source*. That source may be the "king" that the speaker has already insulted in the first line of the poem, or it may be their whole family lineage: "their dull race." In other words, the "muddy" water here may be meant to evoke another flowing liquid: the royal bloodline.

Royal families like England's have historically claimed that their bloodline is "pure" or even divine in origin—that the nobility of their family history makes them suited to lead. By contrast, the speaker is suggesting that this royal family is a worthless bunch whose ancestors were worthless, too.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow / Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring,—"



LEECHES

The leeches in line 4 [symbolize](#) the unrestrained,

self-defeating greed of England's rulers.

Leeches are parasites, sucking creatures' blood and potentially weakening or harming them. In comparing England's "Rulers" to leeches, then, the speaker is saying that these rulers greedily indulge themselves at the country's expense. Like parasitic worms, they lack complex perceptions, emotions, and thoughts: they "neither see, nor feel, nor know." They "cling" to "their fainting country"—gorging themselves off its resources, draining it of vitality—until they can't gorge anymore, and "drop [...] without a blow." This wording suggests that they die of their own overindulgence because their country is too weak to fight them off in any other way. Basically, these rulers are pests.

At the same time, many cultures historically used leeches for medicinal purposes, as "bloodletting" was once thought to treat a wide range of ailments. (Leeches are occasionally still used for certain therapeutic procedures, but not as widely and crudely as they once were.) Thus, leeches are associated with parasitic greed in some contexts and with healing in others.

Shelley may also be invoking the supposed medical benefits of leeches, albeit in an [ironic](#) way. Just as the "flow[ing]" water in the previous metaphor *should* nourish the country but instead pollutes it, these rulers *should* be helping to cure their ailing country. By helping themselves instead, they're making its ailments worse.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know, / But leech-like to their fainting country cling, / Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,—"



THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Describing England's army in lines 8-9, the speaker uses the ancient image of the two-edged or double-edged sword. This image carries a number of [symbolic](#) and literary associations. It's used several times in the Bible, for example, where it tends to mean simply a powerful weapon or force:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. [Hebrews 4:12, King James Version]

The speaker may be drawing on some of these biblical associations, casting the English army as something powerful, dangerous, or even apocalyptic (the "two-edged sword" also appears in the Book of Revelation, a.k.a. the Apocalypse of John).

But in later proverbial use, the double-edged sword developed a more specific meaning: it indicates something that can have both positive and negative consequences, a weapon or tool that can hurt the user while serving its purpose. This is the main meaning the speaker has in mind here. The poem is suggesting that the army the rulers "wield" against the people—"prey[ing]" on them and committing "liberticide" (the murder of liberty)—is very dangerous to the rulers themselves. The people might violently revolt or even turn the army against their rulers.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "An army, which liberticide and prey / Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield,"



POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

[Metaphor](#) features prominently throughout the poem. For example, "blind" in line 1, though referring to the king's *literal* blindness, is probably also a metaphor suggesting that he can't understand his country. (Compare the "Rulers" who, in line 4, "neither see, nor feel, nor know" England's suffering.) Lines 2-3 then metaphorically compare the princes to "dregs" and "mud" in a flowing body of water, and add that this water has a tainted source ("muddy spring"): in other words, the royal family has been badly flawed from the start.

After the [similes](#) in lines 5-6 and 8-9, the poem returns to direct metaphorical comparisons:

- The speaker compares the "Religion" of England to "a book sealed"—an inaccessible text that can't offer wisdom or guidance. (This is probably an [allusion](#) to the sealed prophetic book or scroll in Revelation.)
- The speaker then compares "Senate" or Parliament, which makes laws, to a terrible law in its own right, and suggests it should be scrapped. (Some critics read "Time's worst statute" as criticizing a specific law, but it's more likely aimed at Parliament in general.)

Finally, lines 13-14 reveal that the whole poem has been building toward an overarching metaphor. All the problems of lines 1-12, the speaker says, "Are graves" from which a "glorious Phantom" might arise. Whatever this Phantom is would "illumine our tempestuous day": improve our troubled time the way light breaks through a storm. This metaphor hints at a revolutionary spirit that's waiting to burst forth. The speaker implies that the country's crises represent the end of an era, and maybe even England as people have known it, but the speaker hopes that the "death" of one system will lead to a

"rebirth" of freedom and enlightenment.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "blind"
- **Lines 2-3:** "Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow / Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring,—"
- **Line 11:** "Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;"
- **Line 12:** "A Senate,—Time's worst statute unrepealed,—"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day."

SIMILE

The poem contains two key [similes](#). The first compares England's "Rulers" to bloodsucking leeches, lowly parasites feeding off the country's resources. The speaker makes the image as harsh as possible, portraying these "leech-like" aristocrats as draining "their fainting country" until it doesn't have much more to give—and until they themselves are too full ("blind in blood") to take anymore. (Notice how "blind in blood" echoes the king's "blind[ness]" in line 1.) The fact that they "drop [...] without a blow" suggests the country is currently too weak to fight them off.

The second simile compares the army to a "two-edged sword": a weapon that's dangerous both to its victims and its users ("all who wield" it). These lines contain a warning for England's leaders, prompted in part by the 1819 incident known as the Peterloo Massacre. If you turn the army against the people, the speaker suggests, then the people will fight back. "Liberticide and prey"—destruction of liberty and predatory behavior—will be avenged. This warning ties in with the poem's closing image, which suggests that a spirit of revolution (a "glorious Phantom") may be brewing.

Both the "leech" on society and the "double-edged sword" are familiar [symbols](#). Shelley didn't invent them, but he breathes new life into them through these similes. In the first case, he elaborates on the image and makes it vividly grotesque. In the second, he [alludes](#) to an actual incident in which the army wielded swords against its people, and suggests this violence could cut both ways.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know, / But leech-like to their fainting country cling, / Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,—"
- **Lines 8-9:** "An army, which liberticide and prey / Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield,"

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) appears throughout the poem. Much of it involves hard, explosive consonant sounds such as /b/, /d/, /k/, and /g/; these give the verse a [cacophonous](#) sound appropriate to an

angry poem about social turbulence.

From the outset, alliteration places extra emphasis on the speaker's anger: the first two lines alone describe the king as "despised, and dying" and the princes as the "dregs of their dull race." This effect continues in phrases such as "leech-like," "blind in blood, without a blow" and "starved and stabbed." In lines 4-6, it's almost over the top:

Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,—

Alliteration heightens the harsh, percussive, accusatory rhythm of these lines. The verse seems to drip with disdain and spit with anger.

Also prominent, especially in lines 7-12, is the more specific form of alliteration/[consonance](#) called [sibilance](#). Notice how many soft /s/ sounds occur in these lines:

Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;
A Senate,—Time's worst statute unrepealed,

Sibilance can be soothing or unsettling depending on the context. In these accusatory lines, it makes the verse sound as if it's hissing with contempt.

Another effect of alliteration is to create associative links between words and phrases. In line 13, for example, /g/ sounds link the words "graves" and "glorious," suggesting the close link between the cultural death the speaker's mourning and the glorious rebirth he's imagining.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "despised," "dying"
- **Line 2:** "dregs," "dull"
- **Line 3:** "scorn," "mud," "muddy," "spring"
- **Line 4:** "neither," "nor," "nor know"
- **Line 5:** "leech-like," "country cling"
- **Line 6:** "blind," "blood," "blow"
- **Line 7:** "starved," "stabbed"
- **Line 10:** "sanguine," "slay"
- **Line 11:** "sealed"
- **Line 12:** "Senate," "statute"
- **Line 13:** "graves," "glorious"

ASSONANCE

Much like [alliteration](#), [assonance](#) adds emphasis to the speaker's words and suggests connections between phrases and ideas. It's a less noticeable effect in this poem, where alliteration steals the show, but it crops up at several key moments.

For example, the repeated long /i/ sounds in "blind," "despised," and "dying" add a punchy emphasis to the accusatory first line about the king. The repeated short /uh/ sounds in lines 2-3 ("dull," "public," "mud," "from," "muddy") help tie together the unflattering image of the princes, with one sound seeming to "flow" into another. In English, this sound is often associated with disagreeable or disgusting things (as in words like "smug," "bug," "scum," "gunk," and "disgusting"); repeating it makes these "dull" men sound all the more unpleasant.

Another example occurs in the closing [couplet](#). Assonance links "graves" to "may" to "day," reinforcing the speaker's hope that this dark historical moment might give way to a brighter one. (Similarly, the identical final syllable in "glorious" and "tempestuous" helps reinforce the idea that the one quality might emerge out of the other. In other words, England might need to weather the storm in order to experience the glory.)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "blind," "despised," "dying"
- **Line 2:** "dull"
- **Line 3:** "public," "mud from," "muddy"
- **Line 4:** "see," "feel"
- **Line 5:** "leech"
- **Line 13:** "graves," "may"
- **Line 14:** "day"

CAESURA

[Caesuras](#)—mid-line grammatical pauses—are one of the most prominent devices in "England in 1819." They contribute in several ways to the poem's sound and meaning. For example, in the list of crises in lines 1-12, they help set off items from the characterization or commentary that follows:

Princes, || the dregs of their dull race [...]
An army, || which liberticide and prey [...]

At key moments, they also echo the meaning of the lines themselves, as when the three caesuras that slow down lines 2-3 help evoke the sluggish flow of a "muddy" stream. The two caesuras in line 6, meanwhile, place added [metrical](#) stress on "drop," "blind," and "blood," so that you can almost hear the "leech[es]" in the image dropping one by one. The caesura after "Burst" in line 14 places extra weight on a syllable that (thanks to [enjambment](#)) already starts the line with a "burst" of emphasis.

The caesuras marked off by dashes also contribute an urgent, startling, impassioned quality to the verse, which is already [cacophonous](#) in various other ways. They break up the headlong momentum of this single-sentence poem, giving it a rough, jarring rhythm punctuated by sudden outbursts. In this way, they help evoke a time and place that's also jarring and

violent.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “ , , , ”
- **Line 3:** “ , — ”
- **Line 6:** “ , , , , ”
- **Line 8:** “ , , ”
- **Line 11:** “ — ”
- **Line 12:** “ , — ”
- **Line 13:** “ , , ”
- **Line 14:** “ , , ”

CACOPHONY

The sounds of the poem are overwhelmingly [cacophonous](#), conveying the vehemence of the speaker's anger as well as the cruelty and turmoil of the country he's describing.

Notice, for example, the high number of explosive consonant sounds and hissing /s/ sounds in the first three lines alone:

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,—

Together, all these sounds make it seem like the speaker is angrily spitting out these words in disgust. The speaker does this throughout the poem, densely packing lines with bold, loud consonants to evoke the force of the speaker's rage:

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

Line 5 contains several prominent, liquid /l/ sounds, which aren't cacophonous in themselves but, mixed with the harsher sounds, make the verse seem to drip with disgust. Note the sharp, hard /c/ and /t/ sounds here, plus the screech of the word "leech" itself:

But leech-like to their fainting country cling,

The poem is also full of startling [caesuras](#) (see lines 3, 11, and 12), heavy monosyllables, and variations on the [iambic](#) pattern. These effects add to the cacophony, making the verse as rough and jarring as the events it describes.

Even the more hopeful lines at the end contain a burst of cacophony: the word "Burst," which is [enjambéd](#) over the line break for maximum impact. In the violent world the speaker is portraying, even hope is explosive.

Where Cacophony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-6

- Line 7
- Line 12
- Line 14

PERSONIFICATION

Line 10 [personifies](#) the corrupt laws of England. Laws are made by human beings, but the poem's phrasing suggests that these laws have taken on a life of their own, like monstrous entities that have escaped the control of their creators.

According to the speaker, these laws both "tempt and slay," corrupting people who benefit from them and killing those who don't. (This line might be protesting any number of specific laws, including the controversial tariffs called the Corn Laws, restrictions on free assembly and the free press following the Peterloo Massacre, parliamentary suspension of [habeas corpus](#), and/or the unjust legal system as a whole.)

The adjectives "golden" and "sanguine" can be positive in other contexts, but here they're strongly negative. Rather than "shiny" and "cheerful," they mean "tawdry" and "bloody." They link these personified laws with greed and violence. At the same time, the more positive definitions of "golden" and "sanguine" might apply in an [ironic](#) sense: these laws may *claim* to help England prosper, but really, they're dragging the country down.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;"

REPETITION

Several kinds of [repetition](#) feature in the poem, most notably [parallelism](#). The first 12 lines of the poem, for instant, lists items in parallel clauses, each introduced by a noun or noun phrase:

- "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king";
- "Princes"
- "Rulers"
- "A people"
- "An army"
- "Golden and sanguine laws"
- "Religion"
- "A Senate"

These accumulating clauses (several of which become quite grammatically complex) mirror the way in which England's problems have piled up until they're almost too burdensome to manage. They create a grammatical/dramatic tension that's finally resolved with the introduction of the main verb, "Are," in line 13. In a subtler form of parallelism, several of these clauses contain [appositive phrases](#) set off by dashes:

- "Princes [...] —mud from a muddy spring,—"
- "Religion [...] —a book sealed;"
- "A Senate,—Time's worst statute unrepealed,—"

These serve as brief characterizations of the subject the speaker is mentioning: quick takes on (or quick takedowns of) the "Princes," "Religion," and the "Senate." The dashes convey passion and seeming spontaneity, as if the speaker's anger has suddenly inspired each new phrase.

Some clauses contain internal repetition, too. The rapid parallelism of "neither see, nor feel, nor know" in line 4 emphasizes the vehemence of the speaker's attack on the "Rulers"; the speaker's firing off a series of accusations. The phrase "mud from a muddy spring," meanwhile, is an example of [polyptoton](#): the repetition of words sharing the same root. (It could also qualify as a similar figure of speech, [diacope](#).) The "mud"/"muddy" repetition helps convey the speaker's view that these hereditary royalty have posed a repetitive, multi-generational problem for England.

Finally, the word "blind" occurs in both lines 1 and 6, with the image of "Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know" falling in between. One could even draw a connection between these images and the "book sealed" in line 11 and the "graves" of line 13. Taking the king's literal blindness as (an arguably unfair) starting point, these images suggest that England is sealed off in the darkness of ignorance, unable to understand or learn from its crisis. Ultimately, to the speaker, this ignorance represents a kind of cultural death.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king"
- **Line 2:** "Princes"
- **Line 3:** "mud from a muddy spring"
- **Line 4:** "Rulers," "neither see, nor feel, nor know"
- **Line 6:** "blind"
- **Line 7:** "A people"
- **Line 8:** "An army,"
- **Line 10:** "Golden and sanguine laws"
- **Line 11:** "Religion," "a book sealed"
- **Line 12:** "A Senate," "Time's worst statute unrepealed"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of "England in 1819" is [end-stopped](#), which adds to the heavy, firm, and forceful tone. That said, there are fleeting moments of [enjambment](#) that vary the poem's pacing. Like the poem's syntax, which pours out in a single-sentence rush, these enjambments create a sense of strong forward momentum. It's as if the speaker's powerful emotions (anger, contempt, grief, and finally, hope) are spilling over the line breaks.

In lines 2-3, the enjambment follows the word "flow," reinforcing the moving-water [metaphor](#) by causing one line to

flow into the next:

Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn [...]

At the same time, this enjambment creates a pause, which (along with the three [caesuras](#) in lines 2-3) gives the impression of a slow flow. Again, this feels appropriate to lines that compare England's princes to "mud" in a "muddy" stream.

The most striking enjambment in the poem occurs between lines 13 and 14:

Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, [...]

First, this enjambment places additional stress on the word "may," emphasizing the uncertainty of the hope that the speaker's expressing. Second, it pushes the word "Burst" over the line break, where it disrupts the [iambic](#) pattern (by starting line 14 with a stressed syllable) and is immediately followed by a caesura. Together, these effects place tremendous emphasis on "Burst," giving it an appropriately startling, dramatic quality. The word itself seems to "burst" forth like the "Phantom" that the speaker hopes will appear.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "flow / Through"
- **Lines 8-9:** "prey / Makes"
- **Lines 13-14:** "may / Burst"

ALLUSION

The poem is filled with [allusions](#) from start to finish. The poem's title immediately clues readers into the fact that the speaker is responding to specific circumstances, but those not versed in English history will probably have some trouble unpacking all the details. While readers can certainly get the gist of the poem without knowing all these allusions, they do greatly help when it comes to understanding why, exactly, the speaker is so angry.

First, the speaker references King George III, the ruler of England in 1819. "Mad King George" was in his 80s, mentally ill, blind, and near death at the time Shelley wrote this poem.

Next, the poem references King George III's seven male heirs. These included the Prince of Wales, who had actually been running the country on since 1811 on behalf of his father:

- The speaker deems these "Princes" as the "dregs of their dull race": the worst representatives of their already unimpressive heritage, who disgust England as they "flow" through it.
 - In comparing them to muddy water originating from a "muddy spring," the

speaker implies that the royal lineage itself was tainted from the start. The speaker is probably also suggesting that they're the last of their kind: that royal privilege is on its way out.

The speaker expands the poem's critique to aristocratic rulers of the time in general, who were largely unconcerned with the suffering of their subjects. The poem specifically compares the rulers to leeches, or parasitic worms greedily draining their country of its life force:

- From antiquity through the 1800s, leeches were often used in a medical procedure known as "bloodletting." For the most part, this was a pseudo-scientific procedure that actually harmed patients, but in Shelley's time it was still believed to cure various ailments.
- Thus, there may be implied [irony](#) in the fact that these "leeches" are hurting their sick country rather than healing it.

As this is happening, the speaker continues, regular people are going hungry and are "stabbed in the untilled field." There are two allusions packing into one here:

- In 1819, England was suffering an economic slump that had included poor harvests and food shortages in recent years. "Untilled" thus suggests that England's fields have not been cultivated, or cultivated to their fullest extent. Its working people are "starved" as a result.
- The speaker also references the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, during which the British cavalry charged protestors who'd gathered in St. Peter's Field (in Manchester) to rally for political and economic reform.

Continuing on the theme of a corrupt and cruel military, the speaker then accuses the English army of killing not just protestors, but freedom itself—of committing "liberticide."

- The word dates from the period of the [French Revolution](#), a popular rebellion waged against monarchy in the name of "*liberté*."
 - Shelley himself embraced the ideals of the Revolution and hoped to see an English equivalent.

Moving on, the speaker attacks England's parliament:

- A "Senate" is a governmental body that enacts laws. The supreme lawmaking body, or senate, of England is called Parliament.

- In line 12, the speaker is [metaphorically](#) comparing Parliament to the worst law of all time. (It's possible that the speaker is objecting to one of the specific statutes through which Parliament was established and expanded over the centuries, such as the [Act of Union 1801](#), but it's more likely that he's attacking the institution in general.)
 - In comparing Parliament to the worst law of all time, The speaker laments the fact that it's "unrepealed"—no one's ever gotten rid of it.

Finally, in declaring at the poem's end that some sort of redeeming national spirit might arise like a spirit bursting out of a grave, the speaker may be [alluding](#) to Christian concepts such as the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb and the resurrection of the dead at the Last Judgment. Alternatively, the speaker may be thinking of pagan myths involving ghosts, phoenixes, and so on. Either way, the poem is implying that these "graves" don't have to be final resting places: the speaker hopes England's vitality and integrity can be restored.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



VOCABULARY

Dregs (Line 2) - "Dregs" are impurities that collect in liquid, such as the residue at the bottom of a cup of coffee or glass of wine. [Metaphorically](#), it can mean "the worst part of something," or "the final remaining part of something."

Leech-like (Line 5) - With the adjective "leech-like," Shelley compares the rulers of England to *leeches*: parasitic worms that feed on blood. He means that they are selfishly draining England ("their fainting country") of resources and vitality.

Untilled (Line 7) - "Untilled" is an agricultural term meaning "uncultivated."

Liberticide (Line 8) - "Liberticide" means "the murder of liberty." It was coined to parallel words like *homicide* (the murder of human beings), *fratricide* (the murder of a brother), and so on.

Prey (Line 8) - "Prey" here is the equivalent of "preying" or "predatory behavior."

Sanguine (Line 10) - "Sanguine" in this context means "bloody" or "bloodthirsty." (It can also literally mean "blood-red" or "having to do with blood.") Shelley means that these "laws" cause brutal violence as opposed to civilizing the country. They "slay" the English people rather than protecting them."Sanguine" can also mean "cheerfully optimistic." It's possible that Shelley intends this as a secondary, [ironic](#) meaning

here. Perhaps these laws promise great things for the country, but they deliver only bloodshed.

Statute (Line 12) - A statute is a law.

Unrepealed (Line 12) - To repeal a law is to overturn or cancel it.

Illumine (Line 14) - "Illumine" is a slightly old-fashioned synonym for "illuminate," meaning "bring light to." Shelley is using the word in a [metaphorical](#) sense, the way we talk about positive events *brightening* a bad day or knowledge *enlightening* the formerly ignorant. Whatever liberating spirit ("glorious Phantom") might arise from the events of 1819, he hopes it will bring the light of peace, joy, truth, etc. to the "tempestuous day" (stormy era) England is experiencing.

Tempestuous (Line 14) - "Tempestuous" means turbulent, like a *tempest* (storm). Shelley is describing his *day*—meaning either the year 1819 or the overall period, as in the phrase "day and age"—as a stormy and violent one, for all the reasons he's listed in the poem.

syllable pattern.

That said, the poem's its handling of that meter is dramatic and distinctive, reflecting the turbulent events it describes. Notice the number of variations in the first four lines alone:

An old, | mad, blind, | despised, | and dy- | ing king,—
Princes, | the dregs | of their | dull race, | who flow
Through pub- | lic scorn, | —mud from | a mud- | dy
spring,—
Rulers | who nei- | ther see, | nor feel, | nor know,

The clusters of **stressed** syllables in lines 1-2 establish a bold, percussive sound, appropriate for a poem that's both a portrait of violent chaos and a rapid-fire attack on injustice. Specifically, there's a [spondee](#) (stressed-stressed, "mad, blind") in line 1, and a [trochee](#) (stressed-unstressed, "Princes") in line 2 (plus another spondee, "dull race").

More trochees pop up at the start of line 4 and in the third foot of line 3, helping to keep the reader a bit off balance while describing a country that's completely out of whack.

Throughout the poem, Shelley uses metrical effects to reinforce the tone and meaning of his lines. For example, all 14 lines end on a stressed syllable (a word like "flow" as opposed to "flowing"). This effect enhances the crisp, percussive sound of the verse; each line ends with a bang. Line 11 ends with two stressed syllables (another spondee), as if mimicking the finality of a book slamming shut:

Reli- | gion Christ- | less, God- | less—a | book sealed;

In many lines, the metrical flow is broken by a [caesura](#)—often an emphatic one, as in lines 3, 11, 12, 13, and 14. These caesuras add drama and spontaneity (as if a thought were suddenly occurring to the poet), conveying Shelley's passionate, almost sputtering indignation.

The poem's pentameter never breaks down completely, but the controlled roughness of its surface helps capture a year that's going anything but smoothly, and a nation that's on the verge of falling apart.

RHYME SCHEME

Shelley's choice of [rhyme scheme](#) in this [sonnet](#) is highly unusual, a kind of inverted mishmash of the schemes associated with the Italian (or Petrarchan) and English (or Shakespearean) sonnets. The Italian sonnet typically rhymes according to the pattern:

ABBAABBA CDCDCD

Or:

ABBAABBA CDECDE

Note how the rhyme sounds here mark an eight-line *octave* followed by a six-line *sestet*. The English sonnet typically



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"England in 1819" is a [sonnet](#) that combines several conventions of the English and Italian sonnets. Traditionally, both kinds of sonnet are 14 lines long and, when written in English, use [iambic pentameter](#) (more on that in the Meter section of this guide).

Italian sonnets consist of an eight-line stanza called an octave followed by a six-line stanza called a sestet. Based on its [rhyme scheme](#), "England in 1819" looks like a *flipped* Italian sonnet, with a sestet followed by an octave; lines 1-6 feature *one* pair of rhyme sounds, while lines 7-14 feature a *different* pair of rhyme sounds.

A couple of features of the English sonnet are also mixed in. For example, the poem opens with four lines in an ABAB rhyme pattern, as is typical of an English sonnet. The poem also features a turn, or volta, in its closing [couplet](#), where the poem's argument shifts; here, the speaker moves from talking about England's destruction to its potential rebirth.

Shelley's decision to blend the English and Italian forms may relate to the fact that he was writing about England while in Italy. His decision to flip the octave and the sestet mirrors the chaos he's writing about. The world of England in 1819 seems to have turned upside down, so why shouldn't the poem reflect that?

METER

The poem is written in [iambic pentameter](#), the conventional meter of the English-language [sonnet](#). This means that each line has five iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed

rhymes according to the pattern:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

By contrast, "England in 1819" rhymes as follows:

ABABAB CDCDCCDD

The rhymes mark a sestet followed by an octave—and at the end of this octave is a [couplet](#). The poem thus combines and plays with both the Italian *and* English sonnet schemes. This inverted, unexpected structure seems to fit Shelley's depiction of a world gone topsy-turvy. The mashup of rhyme schemes may also be a sly joke, reflecting his status as an Englishman writing about England from Italy.

At the same time, there's a thread of order and consistency running under the upheaval. All the rhymes in the poem are exact (none are [slant](#) or imperfect), and all are "masculine" (that is, the lines rhyme on a final stressed syllable; "field" and "yield," rather than "yellow" and "mellow"). Shelley is describing chaos, but he, the poet, remains in control of his technique. He's portraying the madness of a society but not giving in to it himself.



SETTING

The poem's setting is named in its title, though Shelley did not choose this title himself: it was assigned by his wife, Mary, after his death. However, the poem's context leaves no doubt that it describes the condition of England in 1819.

Shelley sent the [sonnet](#) to his friend, Leigh Hunt, in December of 1819, in a letter that also encouraged Hunt to speak out about England's troubles: "I wish, then," Shelley wrote, "that you would write a paper in the *Examiner*, on the actual state of the country, and what, under all the circumstances of the conflicting passions and interests of men, we are to expect." The poem's reference to the "old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king," as well as the implied criticism of the [Peterloo Massacre](#) in lines 7-9, map onto the actual events of English history during that year.

In Shelley's view, the England of 1819 is borderline apocalyptic. Its leaders are illegitimate, its people oppressed, its institutions broken. The country has reached the end of an era, not only because its King is dying but also because its overall power structure has comprehensively failed the population. The poet can only hope that the disastrous close of one era will bring the dawn of a better one, as the country rebuilds from the ground up (or, [metaphorically](#) speaking, rises from its "graves").



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

On November 23, 1819, Percy Bysshe Shelley enclosed an untitled [sonnet](#) as a postscript in a letter to his friend Leigh Hunt. Earlier in the letter, he'd urged Hunt, a fellow poet who shared his political views, to speak out honestly about the problems facing England. Implicitly, the new poem was an example of the kind of honesty he meant. He invited Hunt, who edited a radical magazine called *The Examiner*, to decide whether to publish it.

Hunt chose not to, either in 1819 or at any time during Shelley's life. Both men knew the poem could land them in serious legal and political trouble, though Shelley was living in Italy at the time. It first appeared in print 20 years later, when Shelley's wife, *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley, published it under the title "England in 1819" in a volume of her late husband's works.

The sonnet responds to several then-recent events in English history, including King George III's decline and the Peterloo Massacre, a militia attack on citizen protesters. Earlier in 1819, Shelley had already written another poetic response to the Massacre: a [ballad](#) called "[The Masque of Anarchy](#)," which urges mass nonviolent resistance against the English government. Like "England in 1819," the "Masque" begins with



SPEAKER

Readers can take the speaker of the poem as the poet, Percy Shelley, himself.

Shelley first sent "England in 1819" as the postscript of a letter to his fellow poet Leigh Hunt. It closely reflects his own opinions as a writer who was considered a political radical during his lifetime. Neither he nor Hunt published the poem, whose attacks on King George III and others could have landed both of them in serious legal trouble. It didn't appear in print until many years after Shelley's death (and the King's).

Shelley composed the poem while living abroad in Italy. As it turned out, he had left England for good, as he died (in 1822) before returning. The poem thus represents an overview of England's crises by a man who was no longer in the midst of them. Though he speaks on behalf of the English people ("our," line 14), he also brings the perspective of an expatriate speaking his mind about the place he's left.

Nothing in the poem suggests the use of a persona, or any [ironic](#) gap between the poet's perspective and the speaker's. The tone and sentiments here are consistent with those Shelley expressed in his other private and public writings (including the long poem [The Masque of Anarchy](#), another response to the political events of 1819). The speaker's voice is scathing, vitriolic, and righteously indignant until the note of cautious optimism enters the closing [couplet](#).

apocalyptic imagery before turning to hope. However, it's a much longer poem that includes an extended narrative and triumphant call to rebellion. By contrast, the sonnet offers a brief, devastating portrait of a country in crisis, as well as a more ambiguous vision of redemption.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For England, 1819 was the culmination of a rocky decade. King George III had experienced bouts of mental illness throughout his life, but starting in 1810, his illness became permanently debilitating. (Historians are unsure of the medical cause, but his distress was exacerbated by grief over the death of his youngest child, Amelia, in 1810.) By order of Parliament, his son, the Prince of Wales and future George IV, ruled in his place as "Prince Regent" from 1811-1820.

The Prince Regent was widely viewed as spoiled and self-indulgent. Anti-royalists like Shelley saw him as the unqualified heir to an incompetent ruling family. During the decade of the Regency, the UK fought wars with the U.S. (the War of 1812, a draw) and France (the Napoleonic Wars, a victory for the UK and its allies). It also suppressed a rebellious uprising by anti-industrial textile workers known as Luddites. After defeating Napoleon in 1815, England suffered an economic slump that included a terrible harvest in 1816, food shortages, controversial tariffs known as the Corn Laws, and a new wave of Luddite protest.

In 1819, another year of economic depression, these problems came to a head. That August, saber-wielding militia members attacked a crowd of protesters in St. Peter's Field, Manchester, killing 18 people in an event known as the Peterloo Massacre. The bloodshed caused a mass outcry, which the government tried to contain with laws restricting the press and free assembly.

These events form the backdrop for Shelley's attack on England's "king," "princes," "rulers," "army," "laws," and "Senate" (Parliament), as well as his defense of its "starved and stabbed" people. Shelley was also an outspoken atheist who viewed the church as oppressive; hence his attack on "religion." Both his radical politics and religious skepticism (detailed in his 1811 pamphlet *On the Necessity of Atheism*) had embroiled him in controversy throughout the decade, contributing to his decision to leave England in 1818.

Shelley wrote these poems while living abroad in Italy. At the time, he and Mary were experiencing marital problems and mourning the recent deaths of their two children. In other words, 1819 was a "tempestuous" year for Shelley as well as England, and his personal life may have informed the stormy emotions of his sonnet. It's a poem that looks back on the poet's homeland from a distance, with fearless candor.

A lifelong critic of authority, Shelley also sympathized with the democratic ideals of the French Revolution (1789-1799), which ended during his childhood and shook up European

politics for many years afterward. He hoped to see a similar revolutionary spirit overtake England as the country spiraled. Accordingly, "England in 1819" vents his disgust at a broken system—and imagines a "Phantom" of enlightenment rising from the ruins.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Biography of the Poet](#) — Read an introduction to Shelley's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/percy-bysshe-shelley>)
- [The Poem's First Printing](#) — Read the poem as printed in "The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley" (1839, edited by Mary Shelley), where it appears for the first time under the title "England in 1819." (<https://archive.org/details/poeticalworkspe01shelgoog/page/n28/mode/2up>)
- [Another Revolutionary Shelley Poem](#) — Read "The Mask of Anarchy" (a.k.a. "The Masque of Anarchy", another famous Shelley poem inspired by the Peterloo Massacre of 1819). (<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/anarchy.html>)
- [The Peterloo Massacre](#) — Watch a BBC video about the Peterloo Massacre, one of the events that inspired Shelley's fury in "England in 1819." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMig-6w2gNM>)
- [King George III](#) — Watch a Smithsonian Channel video on the mental illness of King George III, one of the issues to which Shelley responded in "England in 1819." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhORV27qxSA>)
- [The Prince Regent \(George IV\)](#) — Read a Britannica article on King George IV, the Prince Regent and effective ruler of England during the period in which Shelley wrote the poem. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-IV>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- [Love's Philosophy](#)
- [Ode to the West Wind](#)
- [Ozymandias](#)
- [To a Skylark](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "England in 1819." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 4 Aug 2019. Web. 24 Mar 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "England in 1819." LitCharts LLC, August 4, 2019. Retrieved March 24, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/percy-bysse-shelley/england-in-1819>.