

ENGLAND IN 1819

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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 leechlike 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.

The poet describes the state of England in 1819:

- The king (George III - eighty-one in 1819 and dead the following year) is "**old, mad, blind, despised** (disprezzato), **and dying**."
- The princes are "**the dregs** (feccia) **of their dull** (ottusa) **race**," and "**flow through public scorn** (disprezzo)" like "**mud from a muddy spring** (sorgente fangosa), unable to see, feel for, or know their people, clinging (attaccate) **like leeches** (come sanguisughe) to their country until they "**drop, blind in blood, without a blow** (colpo)." - He condemns the Hanoverian Royal family and England's corrupt political leaders who are described as "leeches"-sucking the country's blood. The reference to blood is an allusion of Peterloo massacre.
- The English populace are "**starved and stabbed in untilled** (non coltivati) **fields**";
- the army is corrupted by "**liberticide and prey**" - He remarks how the army, itself composed of the "people" is a "**two-edged sword** (a doppio taglio)", used both to defeat Britain's declared enemies and also to attack and kill its own citizens.
- the laws "**tempt and slay**";
- religion is Christless and Godless, "**a book sealed** (sigillato)";
- and the English Senate is like "**Time's worst statute** (probably a reference to the Act of Union between England and Ireland), unrepealed (non abrogate)."

Each of these things, the speaker says, is like a grave from which "**a glorious Phantom may burst to illumine our tempestuous day**."

The poem ends with an intimation of future revolution.

Thème: Shelley, exiled in Italy but following the news from England, summarised his nation's ills in this sonnet.

Shelley was a fierce denouncer of political power and a passionate advocate for liberty. The result of his political commitment was a series of angry political poems condemning the arrogance of power, including "Ozymandias" and "England in 1819." "England in 1819" bitterly lists the flaws in England's social fabric. The furious, violent metaphors Shelley employs throughout this list (nobles as leeches in muddy water, the army as a two-edged sword, religion as a sealed book, Parliament as an unjust law) leave no doubt about his feelings on the state of his nation. Then, surprisingly, the final couplet concludes with a note of passionate Shelleyan optimism: from these "graves" a "glorious Phantom" may "burst to illumine our tempestuous day." What this Phantom might be is not specified in the poem, but it seems to hint simultaneously at the Spirit of the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and at the possibility of liberty won through revolution, as it was won in France.

Form : Is a sonnet, a fourteen-line poem metered in iambic pentameter. Like many of Shelley's sonnets, it does not fit the rhyming patterns one might expect from a nineteenth-century sonnet; instead, the traditional Petrarchan division between the first eight lines and the final six lines is disregarded, so that certain rhymes appear in both sections: ABABABCDCCDD.

The style of this poem is actually extremely unpoetic in a traditional sense. The phrasing is often short and brutal, giving the sonnet the air of a telegraphic report.