Mutability

POEM TEXT

1 From low to high doth dissolution climb,
2 And sink from high to low, along a scale
3 Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
4 A musical but melancholy chime,
5 Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
6 Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.
7 Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
8 The longest date do melt like frosty rime,
9 That in the morning whitened hill and plain
10 And is no more; drop like the tower sublime
11 Of yesterday, which royally did wear
12 His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain
13 Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
14 Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

SUMMARY

Dissolution (the process of gradually fading away) makes its way from the lowest things to the highest things and back again, as if it were awe-inspiring music traveling up and down a scale—music that will always be harmonious. The bell-like sounds of this music are both beautiful and sad, and can only be heard by people who don't get involved in criminal behavior, who aren't greedy, and who don't worry too much. Truth itself never decays, but the things we get used to seeing as true, when they've been around for long enough, eventually disappear, just like the frost that made the hills and fields look white in the morning but then melted away. Those old forms of truth fall like a grand tower of days past, a noble ruin that seemed to wear the weeds growing at its top like a crown, but couldn't hold up against the vibrations of one insignificant little shout breaking the silence—or the inconceivable hand of time falling on it.

THEMES

THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF CHANGE

Wordsworth's "Mutability" suggests that nothing in the world stays the same forever. The poem's speaker reminds readers that grand buildings and human lives are no more solid than frost on the grass; everything melts

away sooner or later. That doesn't mean humanity should live in terror of change, however. Those who can accept this "mutability" (or changeability), the speaker argues, will find it has a beauty of its own because change creates the metaphorical "notes" in the music of existence. The sonnet ultimately suggests that while change (and the endings it brings about) can feel shocking and disturbing, it's also an essential part of the harmony of the universe.

Everything from "high to low," the poem suggests, is subject to "dissolution." In other words, everything, without exception, fades away eventually, destroyed by the "unimaginable touch of Time." Even the most "sublime" and glorious tower, the speaker observes, will eventually become a crumbled ruin, disappearing as surely as "frosty rime" on the grass melts when the sun comes up. Focusing more on endings than fresh beginnings, these images subtly remind readers that death is the most obvious example of inevitable change. To live with change, the poem implies, is to live with loss and grief.

But while change can feel destabilizing and destructive, the poem also sees it as a part of a great and harmonious order. Comparing the rhythms of "dissolution" to the movement of notes up and down the scale, the speaker suggests that change isn't just "melancholy": it's "musical" too, part of a song sung by the whole universe. Without change, after all, there could *be* no music—just one droning note.

Those who can step back from their personal fear of loss and death, the poem ultimately argues, can learn to embrace the inevitability of change, understanding that it shapes the music of existence.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> • Lines 1-14

THE WISDOM OF SELFLESSNESS

"Mutability" suggests that change (and even the decay it brings with it) can be as beautiful as music—but that *perceiving* that beauty is no easy task. The poem's speaker argues that in order appreciate the rhythms of change, people have to put aside their petty anxieties and desires. Only through taking a broad, unselfish perspective on life, the poem suggests, can people perceive the comforting and eternal "Truth" that change, death, and loss are all part of the ceaseless music of existence.

The poem argues that change gives the universe its harmonious, musical "concord," but that music is hard to hear if one is too focused on one's own needs and desires. Because change inevitably means loss and death, people who are full of

"avarice" (or greed), caught up in "over-anxious care" (that is, excessive fretting), or otherwise involved in self-interested "crime" can't appreciate it: they're too worried about losing what *they* personally have (including their lives!) to enjoy a wider perspective.

But those who *can* put aside their wishes and worries, the speaker goes on, will be able to relish the "awful" (or awe-inspiring) music of life on a grand scale—a music whose rhythms are *made* of constant change. They'll also learn a consoling lesson: while the "outward forms" of things fade away, the broader "Truth" that shapes the universe "fails not."

In other words, the unselfish can perceive that death and change are part of the order of the universe—an order guided by a broader "Truth" that, [paradoxically] enough, never changes and never dies. For those who can look past their own little selves, the poem ultimately suggests, change can become a source of wisdom and consolation, a reminder that even mortal people are part of something eternal.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-7

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
And sink from high to low, along a scale
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;

"Mutability" uses a complex [metaphor] to introduce a complex subject: change. The poem's speaker compares "dissolution"—that is, disintegration—to notes moving up and down a scale, making a strange and "awful" music.

"Awful," in this instance, means "awe-inspiring," not "horrible." But the speaker's choice of this ambiguous word suggests there might be something uncomfortable about the music of change. After all, the kind of change the speaker discusses here isn't new life or rebirth, but "dissolution" and decay. This will be a poem more about endings than beginnings. And endings, as this speaker well knows, are often hard for people to accept.

But accept them they must, the poem implies. Take another look at the [repetitions] of the first two lines:

> From **low to high** doth dissolution climb,
> And sink from **high to low**, [...]

The [chiasmus] in these lines suggests that the "music" the speaker is describing here is an eternal circle: the music of "dissolution" makes its way from "low to high," then from "high to low," over and over again. Loss and decay, in other words, are

an inescapable constant.

Let's look closer at the language of the metaphor here as well:

- As the reader has already seen, that movement from "low to high" is an image of music—and an image of the change and "dissolution" that's *necessary* to music. Without high and low notes, there's no tune, just a drone. And the previous note has to dissolve away in order for the next note to take its place.
- But the same "high and low" metaphor is also a reminder that "dissolution" affects everything and everyone, from the greatest kingdom to the lowliest bug.

In only three lines, then, the speaker has introduced both his theme and the complex emotions people might have around it. "Dissolution," this poem will suggest, can feel terrifying and painful. But it's also an eternal part of the universe—and seen in a certain light, it's even as beautiful as music. The "awful notes" of change create, not shrieks of grief, but a "concord" (that is, a harmony) that "shall not fail": an eternal song.

LINES 4-6

A musical but melancholy chime,
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.

The first few lines of the poem introduce the idea that endings and "dissolution" are necessary to the music of existence. After all, if the "notes" of a song never ended, there could be no melody, only a drone.

Now, the speaker acknowledges that this song might be "musical," but it's also "melancholy." If the universe's music requires loss, then it must also involve the *pain* of loss.

That, the speaker continues, is why people must open their minds if they want to have any chance of hearing the harmonious "chime" of eternal music. If people are too worried about losing what they have, then they'll never be able to understand that loss is inevitable, or that it has its own beauty.

That's why the speaker makes a stern proclamation in lines 5-6. Listen to the [polysyndeton] here:

> Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
> **Nor** avarice, **nor** over-anxious care.

That [repeated] "nor" makes the speaker's point crystal clear: people need to give up *all* their petty little concerns if they want to hear the music of existence—and to understand that their own brief lives are notes in that eternal "concord."

Take a closer look at all the things the speaker warns against here. "Crime," "avarice" (or greed), and "over-anxious care" (or fretting) might at first seem to be pretty different: isn't being a criminal more of a problem than being a worrier? But at root, all

these behaviors are to do with *selfishness:*

- Crime means putting your own welfare above other people's.
- Avarice means hoarding goods for yourself.
- And even "over-anxious care," worrying, is just a way of getting wrapped up in what will happen to you and the people and things you love.

Taken all together, then, these lines suggest that, if people want to hear the "music" in the "melancholy" of change and loss, they have to get outside themselves. "Dissolution," the speaker warns, is part of the very fabric of the universe, and it's coming whether people like it or not. The consolation is, those who are wise enough not to struggle against change will be able to hear its beauty and know that they're part of it.

The poem's own music begins to reflect these ideas, too. This poem started out using the rhyme scheme of an Italian sonnet, whose first two quatrains usually rhyme ABBA ABBA (as in this Keats sonnet). Here, Wordsworth breaks from that pattern. The first four lines went ABBA, all right, but in lines 5-8 a new rhyme appears: the second quatrain will rhyme ACCA instead. Even the traditional old sonnet form, this surprising rhyme suggests, isn't immune to change.

LINE 7

Truth fails not

In lines 4-6, readers saw Wordsworth breaking from the usual rhyme scheme of an Italian sonnet, introducing new sounds to this poem's music (and, not coincidentally, mirroring the poem's central theme of change). At the beginning of line 7, he also breaks up the poem's steady meter to deliver an emphatic statement of faith: "Truth fails not."

Up until now, the poem has been written in perfect iambic pentameter. That means that each of its lines uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-**DUM** rhythm. The first line is a great example:

From **low** | to **high** | doth **dis-** | solu- | tion **climb**,

But here, at the beginning of line 7, the poem uses three strong stresses in a row. It's as if the speaker is slowing down, pounding the table emphatically with each word:

Truth fails not [...]

Clearly, the speaker wants readers to pay special attention here. Amid all this talk of inevitable change and "dissolution," these words insist that one thing is always the same: Truth. In a moment, the speaker will even go on to personify Truth as a goddess who reigns over all that ever-changing music.

In fact, a subtle repetition suggests that Truth might actually

embody that music. Take a look back at line 3. There, the speaker observed that the musical "concord" of change "shall **not fail**"; here, "Truth **fails not.**"

In other words: the eternal "Truth" is that, paradoxically, change is the only constant. And if Truth is also a personified deity, there's something comforting in that. "Dissolution" and change, in this reading, aren't just like music: they're like music written by a divine and eternal composer.

It's worth remembering here that this poem comes from a book called *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, a collection in which Wordsworth meditated on his Christian faith. All the language here hints that he sees Truth as an aspect of a Christian God—perhaps a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, which is sometimes spoken of as a female figure.

LINES 7-10

but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime,
That in the morning whitened hill and plain
And is no more;

In the first six lines of the poem, the speaker has introduced the idea that loss and change form an eternal music—one that's hard for people to hear if they're too worried about their *own* "dissolution." In the remaining eight lines, the speaker will acknowledge that releasing one's fear of loss is no easy task, using a pair of similes to explore the "melancholy" and shock of change.

In other words, these lines begin the *volta:* the moment in a sonnet when the speaker turns from one idea to another, taking a new perspective on the poem's themes. Once again, the speaker breaks from convention here by beginning the volta at line 7 rather than line 9, as would be traditional in an Italian sonnet. Surprising change shakes even the poem's form.

"Truth," the speaker has just declared, "fails not": a comforting thought in a world of change. In these lines, the speaker expands: it's only "her outward forms" that dissolve. An immortal, divine, personified "Truth," in this vision, gives shape to the physical world—but those "outward forms" themselves aren't eternal.

In fact, those "outward forms" that have the "longest date"—that is, the ones that have been around the longest—fade away as suddenly as the "frosty rime" that appears on the grass in the early morning, and vanishes by midday. Take a look at the imagery around the speaker's first simile here:

[...] like frosty rime,
That in the morning whitened hill and plain
And is no more; [...]

Comparing the solid things of the world to the frost that

"whiten[s] hill and plain" in the mornings, the speaker gives the poem a new bittersweet flavor. "Dissolution," this image suggests, can feel as natural and lovely as the sunrise—and can make room for new life. That white frost, after all, covered up the green grass.

But even the most natural endings can still feel startling. The whole wide sweep of "hill and plain" was only recently covered in that "frosty rime"—and all of a sudden, it "is no more," and the whole world seems changed.

LINES 10-12

> *drop like the tower sublime*
> *Of yesterday, which royally did wear*
> *His crown of weeds,*

In his [simile](#) of melting frost, the speaker suggested that change can feel bittersweet, beautiful, and sweeping, all at once. Now, the speaker introduces a new simile, one that focuses on the *shock* of change.

In these lines, the speaker paints a picture of a "tower sublime / Of yesterday"—that is, a magnificent old tower from ages past. The speaker even [personifies](#) that tower, presenting it as a regal figure wearing a "crown of weeds." Or rather, it *used* to wear such a crown, before it unceremoniously "drop[ped]," collapsing in a heap of rubble.

This kingly tower again reminds readers that everyone will fall to change, from "high to low," kings to commoners. And for that matter, that "crown of weeds" suggests that *all* crowns might as well be weeds, in the long run: worldly power comes to an end as surely as individual lives.

There's thus something both haughty and touching in the image of this old tower "royally" wearing his futile crown, looking more like a demented old [King Lear](#) than a mighty monarch. (In fact, that "crown of weeds" might be a direct [allusion](#) to the later acts of *King Lear*, in which the mad, dethroned king appears wearing [just such a crown](#).)

In short, this image of the tower suggests just how frail all human efforts are. Even those things that seem sturdiest and most powerful—from stone-built castles to the kings who raise them to the kingdoms they guard—are always on their way to a fatal "drop."

LINES 12-14

> *but could not even sustain*
> *Some casual shout that broke the silent air,*
> *Or the unimaginable touch of Time.*

Through the [simile](#) of the ancient tower, the poem has made the point that every "outward form," even the most powerful, will eventually dissolve into nothing. In these final lines, the speaker imagines the dramatic point of no return when the [metaphorical](#) tower meets its demise.

All it takes to knock the tower down at last, the speaker

imagines, is the echo of "some casual shout." In other words, what fells the tower isn't even anything to *do* with the tower. It's just the sound of someone yelling below.

That "casual shout" might invite readers to imagine, say, a picnicker calling out to a friend who's coming down the lane to meet them. This isn't even an angry yell; there's nothing inherently destructive about it. It's just the sound of life going on around this ancient tower.

And that's the whole point. As life goes on, old things have to fall away; that's just the nature of the world. But this [simile](#) also suggests that there's something awe-inspiring, terrifying, and indeed "sublime" about "dissolution."

Readers who imagine the shock of that casual shouter when the tower behind them collapses will have a sense of what the speaker means. Death, this image says, might be perfectly natural, but it's also unfathomable: how could something that was there just a second ago vanish so completely?

Perhaps that's why the speaker ends the poem by describing the "unimaginable touch of Time": there's something truly inconceivable about time's works. Time's *power*, too, is "unimaginabl[y]" great. Here, "Time," [personified](#) just as "Truth" was, only has to "touch" the tower to knock it over—and the delicate /t/ alliteration of "**t**ouch of **T**ime" suggests that Time doesn't have to work too hard at it. The lightest tap of Time's fingers knocks down the whole material world.

In the end, then, this poem grapples with the real difficulty of faith in a world of change and loss. An eternal and divine "Truth" might conduct the ceaseless, harmonious music of change. But that doesn't mean that change isn't hard to prepare for, hard to understand, and hard to bear. It takes a real moral and imaginative effort, the speaker suggests, to hear the "concord" behind the "dissolution."

✖ POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

[Metaphors](#) help to communicate the poem's philosophy on change and loss. The poem's central [extended metaphor](#) compares change (and especially "dissolution," or disintegration) to music. The awe-inspiring "notes" of change, the speaker tells readers, rise and fall from "low to high" and "high to low" again—an idea that blends two metaphors into one:

- That movement from "low to high" and back again suggests an evolving melody.
- It also reminds readers that *everything*, from the lowliest bug to the highest tower, is *part* of this change: living and dying, rising and falling.

That's why the melody of change isn't just "musical," but "melancholy": there's certainly beauty in this cycle of life and death, the speaker suggests, but people have to accept the sadness of loss in order to hear the harmony of the "chime."

One of the poem's later metaphors returns to the idea that even the mightiest things fall from "high to low." Describing a once-"sublime" tower now fallen into decay, the speaker imagines it wearing a "crown of weeds"—an image that reminds readers that *all* crowns (that is, all worldly powers, speaking metonymically) are in reality frail and temporary.

All it takes is a "casual shout," the speaker goes on, to "br[eak]" the silence of stasis. Using the image of a shout *breaking* the "silent air," the speaker again reminds readers that change inevitably brings destruction with it.

It takes a keen listener, these metaphors suggest, to hear the music of grief and change—to find beauty in life's inevitable losses.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "From low to high doth dissolution climb, / And sink from high to low, along a scale / Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail; / A musical but melancholy chime,"
- **Line 12:** "His crown of weeds"
- **Line 13:** "Some casual shout that broke the silent air,"

SIMILE

Similes help readers to imagine their way into the poem's ideas, turning abstract thoughts into concrete images.

Much of the second half of the poem is given to similes that evoke "dissolution" (or decay) and destruction. The speaker sets up two similes right next to each other:

- The first imagines the "outward forms" of the world (that is, material people, places, and things) melting away like "frosty rime" after the sun comes up.
- The second imagines those forms collapsing into rubble like an ancient "tower" that stands for centuries, only to crumble when somebody's "casual shout" finally shakes its stones *just* enough.

Both of these images involve endings. But readers might notice that there's a pretty substantial difference between the *kinds* of endings these similes are looking at:

- It's a perfectly ordinary, everyday thing for the "frosty rime" that "whiten[s] hill and plain" on a cold morning to be gone by noon. This is a comforting image that paints change and loss as natural and even pleasant: the loss of that frost means the green grass can come out.

- On the other hand, it's not every day that a tower falls—especially a "sublime tower" that has dominated the landscape for years! This image of destruction is much more dramatic—and terrifying—than melting frost.

These two similes thus suggest there's something paradoxical about change itself. "Dissolution," the speaker hints, might be the most natural thing in the world, but that doesn't mean it always *feels* natural: it can be as shocking as a disaster.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-10:** "her outward forms that bear / The longest date do melt like frosty rime, / That in the morning whitened hill and plain / And is no more;"
- **Lines 10-11:** "drop like the tower sublime / Of yesterday"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification reminds readers that the inevitable "dissolution" and loss the poem describes isn't just something that happens to towers and frost: humanity is very much part of the "musical but melancholy chime" of change, too. At the same time, personification also suggests that bigger, wiser forces than humanity are guiding all these changes.

The speaker's simile of the falling tower is one pointed bit of personification. This tower is presented as a "royal[]" figure who wears "his crown of weeds" like a king. The personification here reminds readers that even real-life kings decay and die—and if powerful kings die, everyone else certainly does, too. This moment works rather like a *memento mori*, a reminder that death comes to everyone, from "high to low."

All the world's real power, the speaker says, is in the hands of two related figures: "Truth" and "Time":

- "Truth" is presented as a woman, a mighty goddess who steers the universe, orchestrating the "musical but melancholy chime" of change as if she were a composer. She, alone among all things, "fails not": she's the immortal being behind everything.
- But she doesn't work alone! Her accomplice is "Time," whose "unimaginable touch" enacts all the change she designs.

Readers might even get the sense that Truth and Time are two sides of the same divine being. Both, after all, share the rare distinction of being unchanging forces in a world of change: the *truth* is that *time* moves on.

These personifications might touch on Wordsworth's (rather idiosyncratic) Christian faith. This poem comes from *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, a collection in which Wordsworth explores his religious feelings. Both "Truth" and "Time," working

out their beautiful divine plan, might well be imagined as aspects of a Christian God; the Holy Spirit, for instance, is often imagined as a feminine force.

> **Where Personification appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 7:** "Truth fails not; but her outward forms"
> - **Lines 10-12:** "the tower sublime / Of yesterday, which royally did wear / His crown of weeds"
> - **Line 14:** "the unimaginable touch of Time."

REPETITION

Repetitions help the poem to mirror the eternal cycle of change it describes—and give the speaker's voice its insistent, declarative tone.

In the first lines of the poem, the speaker uses a striking chiasmus:

> From **low to high** doth dissolution climb,
> And sink from **high to low**, [...]

This reversed repetition works like an ouroboros (the image of a serpent eating its own tail): change, these words suggest, moves in an eternal circle, from "low to high" and back again, over and over.

Of course, this poem is mostly focused on the part of this cycle that involves loss and decay—hard realities to swallow, the speaker suggests, if one is too attached to one's own little concerns. To the speaker's mind, the only way that people can experience change as a harmonious, musical "concord" rather than a destructive enemy is by becoming unselfish (and thus not so worried about losing what they have). Listen to the polysyndeton as the speaker makes this point:

> Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
> **Nor** avarice, **nor** over-anxious care.

That repeated "nor" stresses just how clear people's minds have to be before they can hear the changing music of the universe: not one speck of greed or anxiety can remain.

A moment of parallelism, meanwhile, helps readers to reflect on what change feels like:

> [...] her outward forms that bear
> The longest date do **melt like frosty rime**,
> That in the morning whitened hill and plain
> And is no more; **drop like the tower sublime**
> Of yesterday, [...]

By introducing these two similes with the same sentence structure, the speaker invites readers to compare them. Change, the repetition here suggests, can feel as natural and

gradual as sunrise and as stunning and sudden as a disaster.

One final repetition subtly introduces some of the poem's complex thoughts on the nature of the universe. Two things in this poem are said to "fail not" (or to "not fail"): the "concord" (or musical harmony) that change makes out of existence, and Truth itself, personified as a kind of goddess. The "concord" and the Truth, this repetition hints, might be one and the same thing!

> **Where Repetition appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 1:** "From low to high"
> - **Line 2:** "from high to low"
> - **Line 3:** "not fail"
> - **Line 6:** "Nor," "nor"
> - **Line 7:** "fails not"
> - **Line 8:** "do melt like frosty rime,"
> - **Line 10:** "drop like the tower sublime"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambments create a flowing, continuous pace that reflects the poem's interest in change and time.

Since enjambments encourage readers to move on swiftly over line breaks, they often seem to speed a poem up. That effect is especially pronounced at the end of this poem. Listen to what happens as the speaker conjures up a final simile of the falling tower:

> [...] drop like the tower **sublime**
> **Of** yesterday, which royally did **wear**
> **His** crown of weeds, but could not even **sustain**
> **Some** casual shout that broke the silent air,
> Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

All those enjambed lines in a row build a steady momentum—only to come to a sudden pause when that "shout" breaks the "silent air" and knocks the tower down. In other words, the poem's shape reflects exactly what it describes: the poem's momentum, like the tower's shape, endures for a long time, then crashes to an ending.

Lines 2-3, meanwhile, use a gentler moment of enjambment:

> From low to high doth dissolution climb,
> And sink from high to low, along a **scale**
> **Of** awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;

Here, the continuity between lines suggests the ceaseless metaphorical music of change.

Enjambment again mirrors what it describes in lines 7-8:

> Truth fails not; but her outward forms that **bear**
> **The** longest date do melt like frosty rime,

The enjambment stretches the sentence across the line break, just as the existence of the longest-lived things stretches out across time.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "scale / Of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "bear / The"
- **Lines 10-11:** "sublime / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "wear / His"
- **Lines 12-13:** "sustain / Some"

ALLITERATION

A few carefully chosen moments of alliteration draw attention to some of the poem's most important lines.

For instance, listen to the sounds in line 4, in which the speaker describes the eternal song of change as:

> A **m**usical but **m**elancholy chime,

Those gentle /m/ sounds suggest that the music and the melancholy (or sadness) of this "chime" might be pretty closely related. The sorrow and the beauty of change, these matching sounds suggest, at first might appear to be two different things, but could actually be two sides of the same coin. And what's more, these paired sounds feel quietly musical themselves, like a distant echo of the awe-inspiring universal song the poem imagines.

The alliteration the speaker uses at the end of the poem is similarly meaningful:

> Or the unimaginable **t**ouch of **T**ime.

Those two /t/ sounds feel light, quiet, and crisp, like someone tapping on a tabletop. That understated lightness, strangely enough, is what gives Time's "unimaginable touch" its power here. Time, these sounds suggest, is so powerful that it only takes the lightest flick of its fingers to level mighty towers.

The first two lines, meanwhile, use alliteration for the sake of plain old drama:

> From low to high **d**oth **d**issolution climb,
> And **s**ink from high to low, along a **s**cale

The contrast of the strong /d/ and the subtler /s/ here itself suggests the variations in that awe-inspiring universal "scale."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "doth dissolution"
- **Line 2:** "sink," "scale"
- **Line 4:** "musical," "melancholy"

- **Line 14:** "touch," "Time"

PARADOX

This poem rests on a central paradox: change is the only constant. In other words, the only thing that never changes is change itself!

That's a pretty familiar idea—close to a cliché. But the speaker does something innovative with it here. It isn't just the "scale of awful notes," the music of change, that "shall not fail," but "Truth" that "fails not"—a meaningful repetition that suggests Truth and the music of change might well be the same thing. In other words, the unchanging, capital-t "Truth" *is* an eternal and beautiful "concord" made of change.

In this reading, Truth is, in a sense, the spirit behind *everything that exists*. That idea (combined with the personification of Truth as a kind of goddess) makes the paradox of constant change fit into Wordsworth's religious faith. An eternal Truth that shapes the whole world sounds an awful lot like a Christian vision of God—especially when readers consider that the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Christian Trinity, alongside Christ and God the Father) is often imagined as a female figure.

The idea that this Truth is both changing and eternal is also very Christian. A traditional idea in Christian theology holds that God made the world (and all the separate things in it) because, without difference (and thus, change!), *love* can't exist: it takes two to tango, if you will.

Therefore, the big paradox of this "ecclesiastical sonnet" (that is, a sonnet about Christian faith) is that the divine Truth that shapes the world is both changeless and ever-changing: God, in this poem, is a kind of eternal music.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "From low to high doth dissolution climb, / And sink from high to low, along a scale / Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;"
- **Line 7:** "Truth fails not"

CONSONANCE

Consonance gives the poem some music, helping to evoke the "musical but melancholy chime" of change.

In fact, the lines that describe that "musical but melancholy chime" provide one good example of the device in action:

> From low to high **d**oth **d**issolution c**l**imb,
> And **s**ink from high to low, along a s**c**a**l**e
> Of awfu**l** notes, whose concord sha**ll** not fai**l**;
> A **m**usical but **m**elancholy chi**m**e,

Among some emphatic /d/, soft /m/, sibilant /s/, and sharp /k/

sounds, a long, elegant /l/ sound weaves all through these lines. That sense of subtle constancy amid change mimics exactly what the poem describes: the paradoxical truth that change is the only constant thing in the world.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "low," "doth dissolution," "climb"
- **Line 2:** "sink," "low," "along," "scale"
- **Line 3:** "awful," "shall," "fail"
- **Line 4:** "musical," "melancholy chime"
- **Line 6:** "avarice," "over-anxious"
- **Line 8:** "longest date do," "melt," "frosty"
- **Line 11:** "which," "wear"
- **Line 12:** "weeds"
- **Line 14:** "touch," "Time"

📑 VOCABULARY

Mutability () - Changeability.

Doth (Line 1) - An old-fashioned way of saying "does."

Dissolution (Line 1) - The process of dissolving; disintegration. Sometimes used as a metaphor for death.

Awful (Line 3) - Here, "awful" doesn't mean "horrible," but "awe-inspiring."

Concord (Line 3) - Harmony; satisfying musicality.

Melancholy (Line 4) - Sorrowful, gloomy.

Chime (Line 4) - Ringing music, like the sound of bells.

Avarice (Line 6) - Greed (especially for money or possessions).

Care (Line 6) - Worry, fretfulness.

Rime (Line 8) - The icy coating that appears on grass on chilly mornings.

Sublime (Line 10) - Awe-inspiring, majestic, grand.

Sustain (Line 12) - Hold up against, endure.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mutability" is a sonnet—more specifically, a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet. That means that it uses a standard form: 14 lines of iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme that divides the poem into an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet. (See Rhyme Scheme and Meter for more detailed explanations of these terms.)

This particular sonnet also splits into two clear *thematic* chunks: the first six lines introduce the poem's themes of order and change through the metaphor of music, and the remaining eight evoke decay through a series of similes.

That division is a little bit unusual for a Petrarchan sonnet, which usually follows the rhythm of the rhyme scheme and changes tack after the first *eight* lines instead, in a moment called the *volta*, or "turn." This unusual *volta* fits right in with the poem's themes of change and upheaval: here, the traditional sonnet form seems no steadier than that "tower sublime" that crashes to the ground in the poem's final image.

METER

Like most sonnets, "Mutability" is written in iambic pentameter. That means that each of its lines uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's a perfect example from line 1:

> From **low** | to **high** | doth **dis-** | so**lu-** | tion **climb**,

Many readers and writers have compared this meter to a heartbeat or footsteps: it's a swinging, regular rhythm, and one that often turns up naturally in spoken English.

It's also flexible, allowing poets to add little variations that draw attention to important moments. Listen to the rhythm in line 7, for instance:

> **Truth fails** | **not**; but | her **out-** | ward **forms** | that bear

Here, Wordsworth matches a strong meter to a strong declaration. The first foot here is a spondee, a one-two punch of a foot that puts two stresses in a row: DUM-DUM. The next foot is then a trochee—the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm.

There's no ignoring the changed meter of this line: it's like the speaker is pounding the table as he insists that Truth never dies.

RHYME SCHEME

"Mutability" uses an innovative variation on the traditional rhyme scheme of an Italian sonnet. The rhymes run like this:

> ABBA ACCA DACDCA

There's a lot going on here! Most Italian sonnets start with an eight-line octave that uses an ABBA ABBA rhyme scheme. Wordsworth breaks from that convention right away by introducing a new C rhyme instead (lines 6 and 7, "care"/"bear," don't rhyme with lines 2 and 3, "scale"/"fail," as they would in a normal Italian sonnet).

Then, the remaining six-line sestet, which would normally use new rhymes in an orderly pattern—the CDCDCD of this Keats sonnet, for instance—instead goes back and scoops up rhymes from earlier in the poem (those A and C rhyme sounds) and then jumbles them together.

These surprising choices fit in neatly with the poem's theme of constant and overwhelming change: even the sonnet form

seems to fall prey to "dissolution" and disorder here. But this rhyme scheme also subtly echoes the speaker's faith that "Truth fails not." By ending on the same rhyme sound it began with ("climb"/"Time"), the poem forms a circle: the end and the beginning link up. A greater truth, the rhymes here suggest, can make order even out of what looks like chaos.

👤💬 SPEAKER

The speaker here has no clear identity, but it's reasonable to imagine that this poem speaks for Wordsworth himself. Written when Wordsworth was 51—himself creeping closer to his frosty, wintery, ruined-tower old age—"Mutability" sounds a lot like his expression of what he's learned over the course of lifelong observation. (And, for that matter, Wordsworth often wrote poetry from his own perspective.)

But really, it doesn't so much matter whether this speaker is Wordsworth, or anyone else. This is a poem less about a person and more about a philosophy.

🖼 SETTING

While the poem conjures up some landscapes in its similes, there's no one clear setting here. One might even say that the poem's setting is the whole universe! The speaker is interested in forces that transcend space and time—like the "musical but melancholy chime" of change that governs the whole world.

But images of "frosty rime" covering "hill and plain" and of an ancient, ruined "tower" wearing a "crown of weeds" might lead readers to picture a landscape rather like the Northern English countryside in which Wordsworth lived for most of his days. The phenomenon this poem explores, these images hint, appears everywhere: look out any ordinary window and you'll find evidence of "mutability."

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote "Mutability" in 1821, long after his revolutionary poetic heyday. In his youth, he and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge kicked off the English Romantic movement with their 1798 book *Lyrical Ballads*, a collaborative collection that proclaimed poetry should use everyday, folksy language (that's the "ballad" part) to explore the depths of the soul and the imagination (the "lyrical" part).

These were very new ideas in the 18th century, whose most prominent writers (like Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope) were more interested in satirical, elegant wit than plainspoken sincerity. But Wordsworth's and Coleridge's innovations would change poetry forever. Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a

Cloud," for example, meditated on nature and memory in a way that was completely novel in its time—and has now become a perfect example of what readers *expect* traditional poetry to do.

By the time Wordsworth wrote "Mutability," he'd moved into a more conservative middle age. This poem comes from a collection of religious verse, *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, whose reflections on the sweep of time and the beauty of change are the musings of an older and more settled writer.

Many of the younger Romantic poets Wordsworth inspired, like John Keats and Leigh Hunt, were deeply disappointed in his transformation from firebrand to august old figurehead. And these days, those younger Romantics' opinions seem to have prevailed: Wordsworth is better remembered for his early work than his late. But he remains one of the most influential and beloved of all English poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Wordsworth wrote "Mutability" in 1821, the world around him was indeed going through a lot of dramatic change. In 1820, King George III had finally died after a long illness, and his son George IV (who had already been ruling the country as Prince Regent) ascended officially to the throne. This spelled trouble for Britain: the younger George was a dissolute party boy, more interested in drinking and philandering than in sound governance.

During these years, much of the British population was suffering from poverty and hunger, and rumbles of unrest sometimes led to violence. The infamous Peterloo Massacre of 1819, for instance, broke out when cavalry soldiers charged a group of protesters who were demanding wider enfranchisement and parliamentary reform. Hundreds died or were injured in the ensuing battle.

All of this was enough to make Wordsworth very nervous indeed. As a young man, he had traveled in France around the time of the French Revolution, where he was moved and inspired by that world-changing popular uprising. But his excitement was soon shattered by the Reign of Terror, a bloody period when all of France's revolutionary energy boiled over into paranoia, treachery, and mass executions.

This poem might be read as Wordsworth's way to manage his fear of political turmoil. By stepping back to see change and destruction as part of a wide universal "concord," this poem frames turbulent times as just one more part of an orderly divine plan.

📚 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/yMHCj3QAQSc)

- The Wordsworth Museum — Visit the Wordsworth Museum's website to learn more about Wordsworth's life, work, and times. (https://wordsworth.org.uk/wordsworth/)

- Wordsworth's Legacy — Read a review of a recent Wordsworth biography that discusses the poet's continuing influence. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/14/radical-wordsworth-by-jonathan-bate-review-fleet-footed-and-inspiriting)

- Wordsworth's Influence — Listen to Professor Seamus Perry discussing what makes Wordsworth's poetry important. (https://youtu.be/VIGGmVN1bpo)

- More of Wordsworth's Poetry — Read more of Wordsworth's work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- A Complaint
- A Slumber did my Spirit Seal
- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Expostulation and Reply
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- My Heart Leaps Up
- Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room
- Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

💬 HOW TO CITE

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