Mutability

POEM TEXT

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;
  How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,
Streaking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

Or like forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings
  Give various response to each varying blast,
To whose frail frame no second motion brings
  One mood or modulation like the last.

We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep;
  We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day;
We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep,
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:

It is the same!—For, be it joy or sorrow,
  The path of its departure still is free;
Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
  Nought may endure but Mutability.

SUMMARY

People are like clouds covering up the moon at midnight. How swiftly they rush, shine, and tremble, lighting up the night with glowing streaks! But soon enough, night catches up with them, the darkness absorbs them, and they're gone for good.

People are also like abandoned wind-harps, whose out-of-tune strings make different sounds as different winds hit them. These weak-sided instruments never play the same notes twice.

We human beings go to bed and find that a nightmare has ruined our restful sleep. We get up and find that a single passing thought can spoil our entire day. We have feelings and thoughts; we laugh or cry; we hug sorrow like an old friend, or throw our troubles out the door.

But whatever we do, it doesn't matter! Whether we feel joy or misery, our emotion can always leave us in an instant. One day is never, ever like the next: the only lasting thing in the world is Change.

THEMES

CHANGE AND EMOTION

Shelley's "Mutability" argues that, paradoxically, change is the only constant in life—the only part of life that never changes. Human lives, moods, and experiences are all as mutable (that is, changeable) and transitory as clouds on a windy night, and the only thing anyone can be sure of is that "yesterday" will be different from the "morrow." That's especially true because people's lives are so deeply affected by uncontrollable emotions that shift with the breeze. The poem ultimately suggests that change is thus one of the most powerful forces in the world: changeless and eternal itself, it leaves every human being at the mercy of their own endlessly mutable feelings.

People's emotions, personalities, and experiences, the speaker argues, all mutate unpredictably from moment to moment. Imagining people as "clouds" that change shape as the wind blows, or as "lyres" (or harps) that play "varying" tunes when breezes strum them, the speaker makes the point that no one stays completely the same from one day to the next: one day's "laugh[ter]" can always transform into the next day's "weep[ing]."

The speaker adds that, alarmingly enough, being changeable also means being vulnerable. There's no counting on any experience or any feeling for comfort or stability. A normally restful "sleep," for instance, can be "poison[ed]" by nightmares, and a single "wandering thought," popping up out of nowhere, can ruin an entire day. Precisely because no feeling ever stays the same, people end up at the mercy of changing emotions that come upon them whether they like it or not—and those emotions can be agonizing. People might sometimes feel they've "cast [their] cares away," for instance, but "woe" (or sorrow) can strike again at any moment.

If all this is true, the poem argues, then "Mutability"—and especially the mutability of emotions—is perhaps the most "endur[ing]," mighty, and awe-inspiring force in the world. Not only does change shape people's lives from day to day, it also carries them to an inevitable end, when the dark "night" of death will swallow them up "for ever." Change, the poem concludes, is the only constant that exists, and it throws all living people around as if they were ships in a storm.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,
Streaking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

"Mutability" begins with a broad pronouncement: people's lives, the speaker proclaims, are as changeable and fleeting as clouds crossing the face of the moon.

Take a look at the imagery the speaker uses to deepen this simile:

> We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;
> How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,
> Streaking the darkness radiantly! [...]

This vivid description presents the swift course of human lives as a celestial vision. These clouds aren't just speedy and restless, but also beautiful, lit up by the eerie "gleam" of moonlight and making the darkness "radiant[]."

Notice, too, the sweet /ee/ assonance that threads through these lines, making these "streak[s]" of "speed[ing]," "gleam[ing]" cloud sound as harmoniously beautiful as they look.

But all this beauty is fleeting and bittersweet. Take a look at the caesura that breaks into this vision in line 3:

> Streaking the darkness radiantly!—|| yet soon
> Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

That emphatic break in the middle of the line stresses just how abruptly these clouds—and, by extension, people—can be swallowed up in the eternal dark "night" of death. Life, this poem's speaker imagines, is just a brief, shining vision, "lost for ever" almost as soon as it appears.

These first lines suggest that this poem is interested in the beauty of passing things—human life included. The fact that these clouds "speed," moving quickly over the moon and into the darkness, only highlights how lovely their gleaming, quivering, radiant forms are. If the clouds weren't fragile and passing, delicate as "veil[s]," they wouldn't be so lovely.

There's plenty to feel ambivalent about in that thought, however. The rest of this poem will examine both the power and the danger of change.

LINES 5-8

Or like forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings
Give various response to each varying blast,
To whose frail frame no second motion brings
One mood or modulation like the last.

The poem began by reflecting on "mutability" (that is, changeability) with a simile comparing human lives to shapeshifting, vanishing clouds. Now, the speaker introduces a different simile, as if turning the idea of mutability around like a gem to look at another of its facets.

People, the speaker goes on, aren't just like clouds; they're also "like forgotten lyres," abandoned harps with "dissonant," out-of-tune strings, played only by the "blast" of the winds. Both clouds and lyres, this second simile suggests, are helpless before the metaphorical winds of change: the same breeze that pushes the clouds into the darkness makes the lyres play strange, unpredictable music.

But here, the speaker moves away from the thought that change leads to death (the clouds vanishing into the night) and toward the idea that change shapes people's *lives*, too:

- The image of a lyre played by the wind was a common Romantic symbol for people (especially poets) being "played" by their emotions. (Coleridge's great Dejection ode provides one good example.)
- The "frail frame[s]" (that is, weak structures) of these windblown harps thus suggest that people are often at the mercy of their ever-changing feelings.

Listen to the way the speaker uses repetitive language and sounds to make this point:

> Or like forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings
> Give various response to each varying blast,
> To whose frail frame no second motion brings
> One mood or modulation like the last.

The polyptoton of "various"/"varying" here reminds readers that no two notes the wind plays on those lyres are ever the same: even the words describing change *change* shape! There's something similar going on with all that musical assonance and alliteration: the sounds here *evolve*, repeating themselves in different forms.

All these sounds, which paradoxically both repeat and change, fit right in with the paradox at this poem's heart: change is the only thing that *never* changes. And if that's true, the poem suggests, then people are always going to be thrown around by their feelings. Human beings, the speaker suggests, are nothing but helpless instruments, playing whatever crazy emotional tune the prevailing wind of change fancies.

LINES 9-10

We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep;
We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day;

The speaker has moved from imagining people's lives as fleeting "clouds" to imagining people themselves as lyres, harps

playing a "dissonant," unpredictable tune as the changing winds of emotion blow against them. Now, the speaker delves deeper into the role that changing feeling plays in people's lives. Neither in waking life nor in dreams, the speaker says, can anyone escape the power of emotion—and this helplessness often leaves people in dangerous and painful predicaments.

Listen to the intense parallelism here:

> We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep;
> We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day;

These similarly shaped lines (and the strong caesurae that break them) feel like gates slamming shut as the speaker turns first in one direction, then the next, trying fruitlessly to evade feelings. Whether people "rest" or "rise," the poem suggests, there's no escaping troubled, changeable feeling: personified "dream[s]" and "wandering thoughts" haunt people's psyches like Shakespearean villains, lurking in wait to "poison" and "pollute" their lives.

Of course, it would be equally true to say that a sweet dream or a pleasant thought can change a person's day for the better. But this speaker seems more interested in the destructive, "dissonant" parts of change than the comforting ones.

The poem's speaker, in other words, might be a bit of a pessimist, finding change more depressing than hopeful. The idea that pain can spring without warning seems more compelling to this person than the idea that pleasure can do the same.

LINES 11-14

> *We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep,*
> *Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:*
> *It is the same!—For, be it joy or sorrow,*
> *The path of its departure still is free;*

In lines 9-10, the speaker focused on the destructive side of ever-changing emotion, observing that dreams and thoughts have the power to "poison" and "pollute" people's entire lives. Now, the speaker steps back to consider the way that other flavors of feeling change and evolve.

More parallelism gives these lines a gathering momentum:

> We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep,

Here, similar phrasings suggest that all these experiences are equally weighted and equally impermanent. Thought, laughter, and tears, the speaker's parallelism suggests, are all essentially "the same" in the end: none of them stick around for long.

Again, the speaker personifies feelings here, imagining "embrac[ing] fond woe" like an old friend. If "woe" is "fond," it might be both affectionate and foolish—a lover that the speaker knows they might be better off breaking up with. That idea fits in with the speaker's earlier pessimism: perhaps this speaker feels that changing feeling is more likely to bring "woe" than "joy."

Yet none of this, the speaker points out, really matters. Whether one's present feelings are "joy or sorrow," they'll never stick around: the metaphorical "path of [their] departure" is always open and waiting.

All this emphasis on the unreliability and cruelty of feelings makes the speaker sound at once forlorn and dazed. A world in which feelings are both dangerous and inconstant—and in which all that constant change leads only to the dark "night" of death—is a world in which a human being might feel "frail" indeed.

LINES 15-16

> *Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;*
> *Nought may endure but Mutability.*

The speaker concludes this poem with two firm statements:

> Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
> Nought may endure but Mutability.

In other words: paradoxically, the only *constant* thing in the world is *change*. No one can know what tomorrow will bring—but they can be absolutely certain that it won't be the same as "yesterday."

Change, this poem has suggested, can often feel dangerous. People are helplessly under change's thrall, whether it pushes them toward the dark "night" of death or tortures them with harsh, "dissonant" emotional music. But perhaps the simple fact that change never changes also gives the poem's speaker an odd kind of comfort. After all, if change is the world's only constant, it's the one thing people can count on! The speaker's use of the capital "M" on that final "Mutability" even hints at more personification, presenting change as a kind of all-powerful god.

The poem's very form reflects the paradoxical stability of change. In its four stanzas of four lines apiece, this poem is built as solidly as a temple to "Mutability." The singsong ABAB rhyme scheme, too, feels constant as change itself.

But right at the end of the poem, a change in the meter reminds readers that change is, well, changeable. Most of the poem is written in steady iambic pentameter: that is, each line uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

> We are | as clouds | that veil | the mid- | night moon;

But listen to what happens in the very last line:

> Nought may | endure | but Mut- | abil- | ity.

The first foot here is the opposite of an iamb, a trochee, with a DUM-da rhythm. That changed stress places special emphasis on the word "Nought," or "nothing": and indeed, even the poem's stable meter is touched by change, here at the end.

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

Similes help the speaker to convey the idea that people and their emotions are constantly changing—and the sense that there's something both beautiful and sad in all that change.

In the first stanza, the speaker compares people to "clouds that veil the midnight moon." The speaker imagines those clouds "speed[ing]" across the moon's face, seeming to "gleam" (or glow/shine) as they soak up its light, trembling and reshaping themselves as they go. This image introduces the idea of constant change as something awe-inspiringly lovely to see: a quiet, heavenly vision on a moonlit night.

But mere moments later, the speaker notes that such clouds only shine for the brief moment they're crossing the moon: after that, "night closes round," and they're swallowed up by the darkness. This first simile thus reminds readers that change isn't just part of life: it's also the force that moves every living thing toward the eternal "night" of death.

The second simile also unites beauty and melancholy. Here, people are "like forgotten lyres"—abandoned harps played only by the wind. Their out-of-tune strings make "dissonant" music as the wind blows this way and that, and the notes they play are never the same twice. Here, the simile suggests that people are essentially helpless in the face of change: passive instruments with no control over what "mood" strikes them next.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;"
- **Line 5:** "Or like forgotten lyres"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors give shape and drama to the speaker's philosophy on change, evoking the high stakes of life in an ever-changing world.

When the poem describes people as passing "clouds" that "veil the midnight moon," for instance, it depicts human lives as thin, fluttery garments, as easy to take off as to put on. And a moment later, that sense of impermanence gets even more serious when the speaker imagines those clouds speeding across the moon and disappearing into the "night"—a night that is here a metaphor for the long darkness of death. People, in other words, only have a moment in the light of life before they're "lost for ever."

Later metaphors suggest that life isn't just short, it's plagued by unpredictable changes of mood. The speaker personifies both "dream[s]" and "thought[s]" as rather ominous figures: dreams can "poison" people's sleep like Shakespearean villains, and a "wandering thought" ambling through can "pollute[]" an entire day. Here, mood, thought, and imagination feel outright dangerous, maybe even malicious. It's not easy to live in a world full of such characters, the speaker suggests.

Even less actively cruel emotions can be tricky. When the poem describes how people sometimes "embrace fond woe," the experience of being "woeful" (or sorrowful) sounds like a not-so-great relationship: the word"fond" in "fond woe" might equally mean "affectionate" or "foolish." Those who "embrace" such a woe, this line suggests, might be a little bit in love with being sad—perhaps to their detriment.

No wonder, then, that they might break up with their "cares" the next moment, "cast[ing]" them away in disgust. But, as the speaker exclaims, it doesn't matter what people try to do with their feelings: both "joy and sorrow" are always free to take the metaphorical "path" of "departure," walking right out of people's lives.

All of these metaphors suggest that people are trapped in a conflicted, dangerous relationship with change—especially with changing feelings.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "veil the midnight moon"
- **Lines 3-4:** "yet soon / Night closes round"
- **Line 9:** "A dream has power to poison sleep"
- **Line 10:** "One wandering thought pollutes the day"
- **Line 12:** "Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:"
- **Lines 13-14:** "be it joy or sorrow, / The path of its departure still is free;"

IMAGERY

The poem uses one bright flicker of imagery to evoke the melancholy beauty of life in an ever-changing world.

In the poem's first simile, the speaker compares human beings to clouds at nighttime, and goes on to vividly imagine those clouds speeding across the face of the "midnight moon":

> How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,
> Streaking the darkness radiantly! [...]

What makes these metaphorical clouds beautiful, these lines suggest, isn't just that they're "gleam[ing]" or that they gracefully "quiver" into different shapes. It's also the fact that they "speed" past, swiftly changing and ultimately vanishing. Changeability is part of what makes the clouds' fleeting moments of radiance so moving. If the moonlit clouds just hung around forever, the imagery here hints, they wouldn't be nearly

so lovely.

This moment suggests that there's something deeply poignant about change. The simple fact that these clouds—and, by metaphorical extension, human lives—have just one moment to shine in the light before they're "lost for ever" in the darkness of death makes them even lovelier to the speaker. "Mutability," these lines observe, makes the beauty of life feel deeper, richer, and sadder—by making certain that such beauty doesn't last forever.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** " How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver, / Streaking the darkness radiantly!"

CAESURA

Caesura helps to create moments of drama in this poem. When the speaker describes how easy it is for a shift in feeling to reshape one's whole life, for instance, strong caesurae create punchy pauses:

> We rest.— || A dream has power to poison sleep;
> We rise.— || One wandering thought pollutes the day;

The combination of a period and a dash in both of these parallel lines works like a dramatic reversal, an interruption to the expected course of events. It's as if the speaker is imagining people going to their "rest," getting ready to bring the day to a gentle end—only for "poison[ous]" dreams to rise up and say, *Not so fast!* And there's no escape when people "rise," either: the same flavor of caesura reminds readers that waking life, too, can be interrupted by dangerous "wandering thought[s]."

There's a similar effect in line 3, where the speaker imagines people as luminous clouds:

> Streaking the darkness radiantly!—|| yet soon
> Night closes round [...]

Again, there's a sense here that things aren't quite as they seem at first. The speaker builds up a long, lyrical description of clouds, then uses a caesura to undermine that very vision, reminding readers that those metaphorical clouds might shine with eerie, beautiful light *now*—but any moment, they'll slide away into the darkness and be "lost for ever."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "speed, and gleam, and"
- **Line 3:** "radiantly!—yet"
- **Line 4:** "round, and"
- **Line 5:** "lyres, whose"
- **Line 9:** "rest.—A"
- **Line 10:** "rise.—One"
- **Line 11:** "feel, conceive," "reason, laugh"
- **Line 12:** "woe, or"
- **Line 13:** "same!—For,"

REPETITION

Repetitions help to make the speaker's voice sound urgent and insistent.

In particular, parallelism helps the poem to set up one example after another, suggesting that the change the speaker describes can be found everywhere one looks:

- Both of the first two stanzas, for instance, start with similarly phrased similes.
- "We are as clouds," the poem begins; then, the second stanza introduces the idea that people are also "like forgotten lyres."
- The parallelism here gives these first stanzas a feeling of continuity; the speaker is looking at the same phenomenon from two different angles, turning the idea of "mutability" around like a faceted jewel.

A similarly meaningful moment of parallelism appears in lines 9-10:

> We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep;
> We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day;

These two lines feel like identical barriers set up on either side of the reader, reminding them that there's no escape from changing feelings either in sleep or in waking life. The anaphora on the word "We" also makes it clear that this is *everyone's* problem.

Meanwhile, in line 11, parallelism supports the idea that no feeling or experience, however powerful, will stick around forever:

> We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep,

The similar construction of these words makes it seem as if all feelings end up being "the same": it hardly matters whether people are laughing or crying, they'll be doing something completely different before long.

Elsewhere in the poem, smaller moments of repetition create atmosphere:

- For instance, the polysyndeton of line 2—"How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver"—makes it sound as if the speaker is paying

careful attention to the changing clouds, noticing new qualities one by one.

- The polyptoton of line 6 ("give various responses to each varying blast") suggests that change is both an inner and an outer experience: the metaphorical "lyres" play different notes as different winds hit them.
- And the diacope on the word "may" in lines 15 and 16 reminds readers that nothing "may" escape change: change, this repetition suggests, is a kind of natural law, which permits nothing to evade its power.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We are as clouds"
- **Line 2:** "and," "and"
- **Line 5:** "Or like forgotten lyres"
- **Line 6:** "various," "varying"
- **Lines 9-10:** "We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep; / We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day;"
- **Line 11:** "conceive or reason, laugh or weep,"
- **Line 15:** "may"
- **Line 16:** "may"

PARADOX

This poem is built on the paradoxical idea that change is itself the only unchanging thing in the world: nothing, the speaker declares in the closing line, will "endure but Mutability."

The speaker clearly finds this idea both soothing and a little bit frightening. On the one hand, understanding that change never changes might give the speaker an odd sense of stability. If change is a permanent and enduring force, it's reliable, in a certain sense: people can be sure that no matter whether they're "laugh[ing]" or "weep[ing]" right at the moment, they're sure to feel differently before too long. Change, in other words, can be counted on. If one is enduring a painful time, that's a comforting thing to remember!

On the other hand, the speaker is clearly troubled by just how much power change has over people's feelings. In an ever-changing emotional landscape, the poem observes, it only takes "one wandering thought" to "pollute" and spoil an entire day. Since no feeling can be counted on to stick around for too long, and since so many feelings are painful and destabilizing, the paradoxical constancy of change also feels dangerous. "Poison[ous]" shifts of emotion, the speaker feels, always threaten to derail one's life.

The paradox of change thus shapes this speaker's intense, conflicted perspective on the world.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** " Nought may endure but Mutability."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps to give this poem its insistent, dramatic tone. For instance, listen to the sounds of this passage from lines 7-8, in which the speaker elaborates on a simile comparing people to "forgotten lyres," wind-harps:

> To whose frail frame no second motion brings
> One mood or modulation like the last.

Here, a cluster of alliterative sounds mimics what these lines are describing: a sequence of evolving "notes," moving from /fr/ sounds through /m/ sounds to /l/ sounds. This densely alliterative passage both sounds musical itself and demands attention. All those repeated sounds make the speaker's voice sound stylized and artful; this, the reader understands, must be an idea the speaker wants to single out.

There's a similar emphatic spell of alliteration at the very end of the poem in lines 15-16:

> Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
> Nought may endure but Mutability.

This passage, riddled with /m/ sounds (and a couple of similar /n/ sounds for texture), all lead toward the final and most important m-word: "Mutability." Here, alliteration works rather like a drumroll, building up to a big reveal that's only emphasized further by that capital M. *Everything*, the alliteration here hints, is under Mutability's sway—so much so that the word's very sounds fill up the lines.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "midnight moon"
- **Line 5:** "like," "lyres"
- **Line 7:** "frail frame," "motion"
- **Line 8:** "mood," "modulation," "like," "last"
- **Line 9:** "rest," "power," "poison"
- **Line 10:** "rise," "One wandering," "pollutes"
- **Line 12:** "cast," "cares"
- **Line 13:** "same," "sorrow"
- **Line 15:** "Man's," "may," "ne'er," "morrow"
- **Line 16:** "Nought," "may," "Mutability"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives the speaker's voice music and power.

Take the sounds in lines 2-3, for instance. Here, the speaker elaborates on a simile comparing people to "clouds that veil the midnight moon":

How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,
Streaking the darkness radiantly! [...]

All those drawn-out /ee/ sounds themselves feel as long as "streak[s]" of cloud stretched out across the face of the moon. They also harmoniously weave these lines together, making this picture of shifting clouds feel both beautiful and poignant. Those clouds, after all, won't last for long: "night closes round" and swallows them up mere moments later.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "speed," "gleam"
- **Line 3:** "Streaking"
- **Line 5:** "like," "lyres," "dissonant strings"
- **Line 7:** "frail frame"
- **Line 9:** "dream," "sleep"
- **Line 10:** "wandering thought"
- **Line 11:** "feel," "conceive," "reason," "weep"

VOCABULARY

Radiantly (Line 3) - Luminously—as if the moonlit clouds were glowing.

Lyres (Line 5) - Harps. Here, Shelley specifically means wind-harps, instruments designed to be strummed by the breeze.

Dissonant (Line 5) - Discordant, unharmonious.

Blast (Line 6) - Gust of wind.

Frail (Line 7) - Weak, feeble.

Modulation (Line 8) - Change, especially the change between one musical note and another.

Conceive (Line 11) - This word can mean either "understand" or "come up with a new idea."

Fond (Line 12) - This word can mean either "foolish" or "loving." The speaker might be suggesting that embracing "woe" (or sorrow) can feel both familiar (like embracing a loved one) and stupid.

Woe (Line 12) - Sorrow, unhappiness.

Ne'er (Line 15) - A contraction of "never."

Morrow (Line 15) - Tomorrow, the next day.

Nought (Line 16) - Nothing.

Mutability (Line 16) - Changeability.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mutability" doesn't follow any particular form, such as the sonnet or the villanelle. Instead, it simply uses four concise quatrains (four-line stanzas) to make its big philosophical point that change is the only constant.

This form itself feels pretty constant! With four stanzas of four lines apiece, the poem's structure is as solid and square as a house. For all its images of changing winds and wandering clouds, the poem plants itself firmly on the ground to declare what the speaker believes to be an eternal truth: "Nought may endure but Mutability."

METER

"Mutability" is written in iambic pentameter. That means that each line is built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's a perfect example from line 9:

We rest. | —A dream | has power | to poi- | son sleep;

(Note that, in Shelley's 19th-century English accent, "power" would have been pronounced as one syllable: *pow'r*.)

Iambic pentameter is so common in English-language poetry that readers might take it as a neutral option here, a blank slate that the speaker can use to put philosophy (rather than style) front and center. A lot of spoken English falls naturally into an iambic rhythm, so this meter often feels seamless.

Iambic pentameter is also pleasantly flexible, allowing the speaker to change up a foot here or there for emphasis. Listen to what happens in the poem's final line, for instance:

Nought may | endure | but Mu- | tabil- | ity.

This line begins, not with an iamb, but with its opposite foot: a trochee, which has a DUM-da rhythm. That means the first word here, "Nought" (or "nothing"), gets a little extra punch so that the speaker's voice sounds fervent and serious.

RHYME SCHEME

"Mutability" uses a traditional alternating rhyme scheme. Each four-line stanza's pattern runs like this:

ABAB

This pattern, like the poem's iambic meter, will feel pretty familiar to a lot of readers: it's one of the most common rhyme schemes in poetry. This poem's speaker seems more interested in communicating an urgent insight than in getting fancy with rhyme and meter.

Perhaps, though, these regular rhymes also fit in with the poem's big point: the only thing that *doesn't* change is change itself. The rhymes here are both changing (from A to B and back again) and constant (always in the same pattern)—just like "Mutability."

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker doesn't have any clear identity; this poem is less about its speaker than about that speaker's *philosophy*. However, readers might well interpret the speaker here as Shelley himself, since he often wrote poetry that expressed his own beliefs (both personal and political).

Perhaps this speaker wouldn't own up to having a single, straightforward character at all. This poem's insistence that "Mutability" is life's only constant suggests that the speaker doesn't feel like a stable, definable sort of person.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem. The speaker sometimes conjures up scenes from nature to make a point—for instance, depicting changeable people as luminous clouds speeding across the face of the moon. But these pictures are only metaphorical: the poem's real setting is the speaker's mind.

For that matter, though, the speaker might argue that the poem is set in the whole world. To this speaker, "Mutability" is a universal constant, the one thing that stays the same wherever you go.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was one of a group of 19th-century British writers now known as the Romantics. Alongside notable figures like his wife Mary Shelley (the author of *Frankenstein*—in which the Creature himself quotes this very poem) and his friend Lord Byron, Shelley helped to transform literature forever.

Shelley's work, like a lot of Romantic poetry, was concerned with deep feeling, the power of the natural world, and a desire for political and personal freedom. Where earlier Enlightenment-era writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift aspired to elegant phrasings and satirical wit, Shelley and many of his contemporaries preferred to write passionate verse that valued the mysteries and terrors of the imagination over crisp rationality.

This relatively early poem, which first appeared in Shelley's 1816 collection *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*, is a great example of some classic Romantic tropes. Imagining people as wandering clouds and abandoned lyres, Shelley follows in the footsteps of two of the fathers of English Romanticism: Wordsworth (who famously "wandered lonely as a cloud") and Coleridge (who heard an echo of his own sorrows in an "Aeolian lute"). The radical young Shelley wasn't always too pleased with his forebears, though; he even wrote a dismayed sonnet criticizing Wordsworth's political conservatism.

Shelley is often associated with Byron (a close friend and sometime collaborator) and Keats (a more distant acquaintance), not just because the three men were all important Romantic poets, but because they all died tragically young. Shelley, with particular drama, drowned in a shipwreck in the Bay of Naples after he insisted on sailing out in a storm. His short life, poetic death, radical convictions, and passionate verse all mean he's remembered as the quintessential Romantic hero, and he remains a beloved and widely-read poet to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shelley published this poem in 1816—a time of much turmoil and "mutability." England at this time was full of rebellious energy: the king, George III, had lost his mind, and the people weren't too pleased to be governed by his dissolute young son the Prince Regent (who would become King George IV after his father finally died in 1820).

Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution was just beginning to kick into gear. During this time, factory work began to overtake farming as the country's primary form of labor, and cities like London and Manchester became bigger and more powerful as people moved there from the countryside, looking for work. To top it all off, England in 1816 was suffering severe crop failures and famine. Poverty, hunger, and inequality were widespread.

Shelley, always politically radical, was fascinated by all this upheaval; in fact, he longed for *more* change, in the form of an economic and social revolution that would address the injustices he saw all around him. (As a pacifist, he always optimistically hoped that such a revolution could come about without bloodshed.) This poem is one of many he wrote in which he seems both exhilarated and overwhelmed by the unstoppable forces of change.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short Biography — Visit the British Library's website to learn more about Shelley's turbulent life. (https://www.bl.uk/people/percy-bysshe-shelley)
- The Poem's Composition — Learn more about the circumstances in which Shelley wrote this poem (and his collaboration with his wife Mary, herself an important writer). (https://percyandmaryshelley.wordpress.com/2015/12/04/long-post-on-this-day-in-1815-the-shelleys-and-mutability/)
- The Keats-Shelley Museum — Visit the website of the Keats-Shelley Museum to learn more about Shelley's life and times (and how he fits into the wider Romantic

movement). (https://ksh.roma.it/)

- Shelley's Legend — Take a look at an 1889 painting of Shelley's cremation—a dramatic image that reflects Shelley's role as a quintessential Romantic poet. (https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-funeral-of-shelley-louis-edouard-fournier/uwFW5-eMuEhgAA?hl=en)
- Shelley's Influence — Read biographer Richard Holmes's essay on Shelley's literary legacy. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jan/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview1)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- England in 1819
- Love's Philosophy
- Ode to the West Wind
- Ozymandias
- Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples
- To a Skylark

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Mutability.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 2 Dec 2021. Web. 16 Dec 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Mutability.*" LitCharts LLC, December 2, 2021. Retrieved December 16, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/percy-bysshe-shelley/mutability.