The Mountain

SUMMARY

At night, I can sense something behind me. I suddenly start moving, but after only a moment, I flinch or stumble to a stop and grow hot. I don't know how old I am.

By the morning, everything has changed. The surrounding world is like an open book that challenges me to read it, but is too close to read comfortably. Tell me my age.

Next, the valleys around me accumulate thick clouds of mist that fog up my senses, as if stuffing cotton into my ears. I don't know how old I am.

I'm sorry to complain; I try not to. People say that my confusion is deserved. Nobody gives me any information. Tell me my age.

The most entrenched division can gradually flatten out like a tattoo whose lines have blurred over time. I don't know how old I am.

Night falls. Daylight rises, the lights climbing up quickly—Oh, you bright young things never stick around as long as I'd like! Tell me my age.

Wings, rigid as if turned to stone, have drifted to the ground around me, the feathers piling up and hardening (perhaps compacting into new rock). The birds' claws have been lost somewhere in the mix. I've lost track of my age.

I'm losing my hearing. Birdsong becomes fainter and rushing water is allowed to flow unchecked. How old am I? Tell me my age.

Bring on the nighttime—the moon and stars can hang out at their leisure. I just want to know my age. Tell me.

THEMES

THE PAIN, CONFUSION, AND ISOLATION OF AGING

To the speaker of this poem, growing old feels a lot like turning into an ancient, lonely mountain. Reaching old age has left the speaker cut off from the living world: the speaker feels as if they've lost their identity, their community, and even their place in time. The speaker's desperate longing to regain some of what's been lost—or at least to be acknowledged by the surrounding world—suggests that aging can be a painful and isolating process, like turning to stone.

Time has clearly taken a toll on the elderly speaker's body and senses; the speaker now feels less like a person than like a frozen, helpless rock. They describe the ailments of old age as if their body has transformed into an ancient mountain. It's also possible, in the imaginative world of the poem, that the speaker really *is* a mountain. Either way, all this rock imagery symbolizes old age and the way that it feels to helplessly watch the world pass you by.

The speaker goes on to describe some of the specific struggles that come with aging. They're "growing deaf," for instance, and feel as though thick "mists" have been stuffed into their ears. They imagine their incontinence as "waterfalls" that "go unwiped," are confused and disoriented by their surroundings, and also seem to be losing mobility: they can only "start for a second" before stumbling to a quick "halt," as if shaken by an earthquake or some other natural disruption.

The speaker's dim recollections of youth seem only to heighten their present pain. The mountainous landscape is littered with the hardened "feathers" of birds with lost "claws," which might represent the speaker's youth and vitality. Such things now exist only as fossilized reminders of the speaker's past and all the things they can no longer do.

Trapped in this mountain-like stillness, the speaker finds it hard to connect with their surroundings. Imagining the "clambering lights" of day as "children," the speaker wistfully exclaims that "[they] never stay long enough." Moreover, those "children" don't show the speaker any empathy, nor does the rest of the environment. Instead, the speaker claims, "They say it is my fault" and "Nobody tells me anything." In other words, the speaker feels cut off from the lively, active world of the young—and also feels neglected by that world.

Ultimately, the speaker feels so old that they've lost contact with a human time scale; they're trapped in a kind of geological ancientness. The speaker repeats, "I do not know my age" and begs the reader to "Tell me how old I am," suggesting that they may have lost their memory—and thus their sense of how they fit into the world. Even such identity markers as the speaker's birthday, the "Deepest demarcation" there is, seem "blurred" past understanding. For this speaker, then, growing old feels bewildering, uncomfortable, and restrictive, like turning into a massive lump of stone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

At evening, something ...
... know my age.

Before "The Mountain" even begins, its title tips readers off to the extended metaphor that will shape the poem: the speaker takes on the perspective of an ancient, isolated mountain, likening the aging process to turning into a helpless block of stone.

As the first stanza then begins, the poem establishes the speaker's disorientation and fear:

- It's "evening," meaning it's dark out, and the speaker can sense that there's "something" behind them. Right away, then, the poem is filled with uneasy suspense. Given that the speaker is presented as a mountain, it's possible that this something is in fact the sun going down.
- In the next line, this "something" outright startles the speaker, who "start[s] for a second" and then flinches, indicating fear, pain, and/or surprise. "Blench"—the term chosen to describe the speaker's sudden reaction—also means to grow pale and further suggests that the speaker is afraid.
- After flinching, the speaker "staggeringly halt[s] and burn[s]." The word "staggeringly" indicates that the speaker's movements are awkward or uneven. But this term is typically used to describe something astounding or surprising, so it also strengthens the impression that the speaker is alarmed—perhaps at whatever presence the speaker senses behind them, or perhaps at their own immobility.
- Meanwhile, "burn" indicates that the speaker grows hot, likely out of fear or embarrassment.

These movements recall an earthquake or some other disturbance in the earth's crust (which is triggered by activity in the mantle, perhaps brought to mind by the word "burn"). This initial description also implies that the mountain of the poem's title is inactive—that it's no longer growing, but rather has been left to slowly erode with time. Its only movements are brief, awkward, and uninvited.

The first stanza then concludes with the simple statement, "I do not know my age," which will be repeated as a refrain throughout the poem. This stark line clues readers into the fact that all this mountain-related language is really a way of describing what it feels like to grow old—so old that the speaker begins to forget how long they've actually been alive! The literal darkness of evening here thus becomes symbolic of the aging speaker's confusion and lack of awareness about what's happening around them.

The sounds of the poem itself add to its detached, melancholy tone. Note, for example, its use of accentual trimeter: most lines here have three stressed beats, with varying numbers of unstressed syllables between them. Here's a look at the meter in lines 1-2, for instance:

> At evening, something behind me.
> I start for a second, I blench,

There are three strong beats per line, and this relatively repetitive cadence might reflect the monotony of the speaker's daily life. The fact that all the lines here are clearly end-stopped, meanwhile, creates a plodding pace. The poem's relatively sluggish cadence and clear pauses might reflect the slow movements of the speaker's aging body.

LINES 5-8

> *In the morning ...*
> *... old I am.*

The fearful and mysterious "evening" has apparently come to an end, and now it's morning"—and, the speaker says, things are "different."

Where darkness usually symbolizes ignorance, fear, and confusion, light usually represents the opposite: knowledge and awareness. Readers might thus assume that daylight would offer the speaker some relief. But, ultimately, it leaves the speaker feeling just as alienated and confused as they were the night before.

At daybreak, "an open book confronts" the speaker—the word "confront" personifying this book and suggesting that it's assertive, aggressive, and unwelcome. This book might represent the landscape laid out below the mountain (and thus the aging speaker's surroundings). The speaker can't actually "read" whatever insight this book might offer, however, because the book is so close:

- This might allude to the aging speaker's failing eyesight, which physically *can't* bring their surroundings into proper focus.
- At the same time, the wording of this line alludes to the common phrase "too close for comfort," which suggests that this book is dangerously *familiar* and the speaker doesn't *want* to read it.
    - In other words, this book might expose some truth about the speaker that they don't want to "confront" (perhaps, the truth of their aging state, or the "open book" of their own life).

In any case, what's clear is that the speaker can't decipher or make meaning out of their surroundings, and the glaring light of day thus feels cruel rather than comforting. Note how the crisp alliteration of /k/ sounds call attention to the daylight's harshness:

> An open book confronts me,
> too close to read in comfort.

The speaker then goes on to, once again, implore the audience, "Tell me how old I am." The speaker seems to want to ground themselves within their environment by at least knowing their age, but cannot.

The speaker's plea to "Tell me" also marks the poem's first example of apostrophe, as the speaker addresses some party outside of the poem who is unable to respond. This device encourages readers' sympathy for the speaker, who seems to call out to them directly.

LINES 9-12

And then the ...
... know my age.

The speaker continues to use natural metaphors to frame their discomfort, casting the surrounding landscape as a hostile provoker of the speaker's suffering.

The speaker starts with the phrase "And then"—immediately after stanzas describing life "At evening" and "In the morning." What follows thus feels like the next step within a larger process (that is, the speaker getting older). And because the speaker's ailments are linked to the daily cycle of night and day, readers can assume that the speaker faces these challenges over and over again.

The specific challenge that the speaker describes in this stanza is likely a metaphor for hearing loss. The says that the "valleys stuff" thick clouds into the speaker's ears to the point that they feel filled with "cotton." This description personifies the landscape, suggesting that the speaker's environment is actively harsh and oppressive. The valleys' mists are "impenetrable," a word suggesting that they're both physically dense and also difficult to understand.

Note how the sounds of the poem itself at this moment reflect that impenetrability, those dense /m/, /f/, and /s/ sounds muffling the line:

> And then the valleys stuff
> impenetrable mists

This passage then concludes, once again, with the phrase "I do not know my age." The appearance of the refrain here suggests a *connection* between the hostile quality of the landscape and the speaker's own confusion. That is, it's the valleys' impairment of the speaker's senses that makes the speaker so disoriented. The aging speaker feels cut off from the world around them, and this, in turn, makes the speaker feel cut off from a crucial fact about themselves (how old they are).

LINES 13-16

I do not ...
... old I am.

The speaker insists that they aren't trying to whine about the difficulties of daily life, perhaps implying that those around the speaker (likely their family members, peers, or caregivers) can't be bothered with how the speaker is feeling. In fact, the speaker goes on to say that "they" blame the *speaker* for the speaker's own suffering! This might evoke the way that younger people at times lack empathy for the elderly and get frustrated with the slowness of their movements, repetitiveness, and inability to hear clearly.

"They say it is my fault" is also a pun:

- In geology, a fault can refer to a major crack in the earth's crust or a division between tectonic plates. Activity along faults can cause mountain formation as well as earthquakes and other geological disturbances.
- "Fault" thus works to describe both the literal mountain and the human speaker this mountain represents.
- In both cases, the term describes the speaker's suffering as deserved, or at least an inevitable part of the speaker's nature; the speaker can't help but make a convoluted mess of things.

The speaker goes on to claim that no one lets them in on what's happening to them and why—or gives them any information at all, for that matter. The speaker thus again asks the reader to fill this void, repeating "Tell me how old I am," this refrain sounding all the more desperate as the poem moves along.

This stanza's particularly brief and simple sentences, apologetic but self-pitying tone, and demands make the speaker come across as somewhat childlike—especially as they describe being talked down to and having information withheld from them. As such, readers sense the speaker's growing helplessness.

LINES 17-20

The deepest demarcation ...
... know my age.

The "the deepest demarcation," or boundary, can gradually flatten over time, the speaker says.

This description is reminiscent of mountain ranges that very slowly level out over time, as water and other forces erode them. Rushing water carries pieces away ("spreading" the mountain thin), while it gradually loses altitude or "sinks." The "deepest demarcation" also recalls cracks in the earth's crust, or faults, which can both create mountain ranges and disturb them.

The speaker seems to be using this natural metaphor to describe how people's identities may blur with age, implying that any part of someone can be lost—no matter how "deep" that memory or personal quality might run.

Alliteration and assonance draw readers' attention to this

image:

> The deepest demarcation
> can slowly spread and sink

The /s/ sounds of line 18 are particularly striking, the sibilance suggesting the gentle, steady (and perhaps sinister) way in which people lose track of certain parts of themselves.

Using a simile, the speaker then further likens this process to a tattoo growing fuzzy and vague over the years through sunlight exposure and skin stretching/sagging. People usually think of tattoos as permanent, distinguishing physical features—individual markers of someone's identity—but the speaker says that time can transform even such a "deepest demarcation" into a vague form that might as well be "any" old marking.

Once again, the speaker closes this stanza with "I do not know my age," implying that the speaker's age is one such lost quality—perhaps the speaker's "deepest demarcation" that they most wish to regain.

LINES 21-24

Shadows fall down; ...
... old I am.

The poem began in the "evening," before moving on to the following "morning." Now, "[s]hadows fall down" while lights "climb." In other words, the sun is rising higher into the sky, and it's doing so with a sense of energy and excitement. Indeed, the speaker goes on to describe those lights as "[c]lambering," meaning that they move with speed and urgency as they rise out of the speaker's grasp.

Note how the sounds of these lines fill them with a kind of intensity that reflects that urgency. There's the striking consonance of /c/, /l/, and /m/ sounds plus the rousing assonance of long /i/ sounds:

> [...] lights climb.
> Clambering lights [...]

Together these sounds add energy and exuberance to the description of these fleeting lights. Earlier in the poem, the speaker linked light with knowledge, understanding, and awareness—all things that seem to be actively slipping away from the speaker.

The speaker thus cries out, calling the lights "children" and lamenting that they never stick around "long enough." This links light not just with knowledge, but also with youth and vitality—things that, the speaker insists, are gone far too quickly.

Again, the speaker seems to be cut off from the rest of the world, unable to connect with their environment (and especially the youthfulness and knowledge it might offer). This example of apostrophe feels impassioned, verging on desperate, revealing the speaker's distress when left in the dark.

LINES 25-28

Stone wings have ...
... know my age.

The childlike lights having "clambered" away, the speaker turns to the surroundings that remain behind. Things look pretty bleak:

- The mountain is covered with the "stone" wings of birds, apparently long dead. The wings are like petrified fossils, drained of all life and agility (and, importantly, of the ability to fly).
- These stony "feathers," in turn, are "hardening [other] feathers," or fossilizing the feathers that pile up around them. This might also be a reference to the formation of (sedimentary) rocks, wherein organic materials are slowly compacted into solid rock with pressure over time. Indeed, the speaker refers to the wings as "stone," so perhaps the speaker feels a special kinship with fallen birds.
- The birds' fierce "claws," meanwhile, have also been "lost somewhere," which perhaps speaks to the way that the speaker has lost their own tenacity and sharpness with age.

All this imagery encourages the audience to envision the stony, statuelike fallen birds and the profound sense of loss they might represent. The speaker's description of the hardened birds—the wings that might allow them to soar freely and the claws that allow them to grip and attack—evoke agility, freedom, beauty, and ferocity. But all of these qualities have been lost to time. Therefore, the birds can be seen as a symbol of the fleeting nature of life—especially of youth, and perhaps of the limitless dreams that youth may inspire.

LINES 29-32

I am growing ...
... old I am.

The speaker's hearing loss appears to be getting worse. The poem's third stanza explains that the speaker's hearing is obstructed as though there's "cotton in [the speaker's] ears"; now, the speaker is "growing deaf." As elsewhere in the poem, the speaker uses a series of metaphors to compare their own experient to the natural environment that surrounds an ancient, isolated mountain.

First, "bird-calls dribble," indicating that the speaker's ability to hear their surroundings has dried up. With it, the birdsong's beauty and the potential for communication it offers also

escape the speaker. Recall that the preceding stanza established these birds as symbolic of lost agility and of the ephemerality of youth and life in general. The reference to "bird-calls" here thus reinforces the poem's atmosphere of loss and disconnection as the speaker describes the struggles of growing older.

The speaker then states that "the waterfalls / go unwiped":

- This is likely a metaphor for incontinence.
- At the same time, note that rushing water erodes mountains. Readers might thus imagine that these unwiped waterfalls flowing unchecked over the mountain will weaken it and wear away its surface.
- Altogether, the implication here is that the speaker can no longer take care of themselves and they will continue to decline physically.

The enjambment of lines 29 and 30, combined with the end rhyme of "Bird-calls" and "waterfalls," adds momentum to the poem at this moment, evoking the rush of the water that spills over the mountain:

> I am growing deaf. Bird-calls
> dribble and the waterfalls
> go unwiped. [...]

The speaker then seems desperate, almost frenzied, as they explicitly ask the audience a question for the first time: "What is my age?"

LINES 33-36

> *Let the moon ...*
> *... old I am.*

As the poem comes to a close, the speaker calls out to "the moon" and "the stars," essentially telling them to go ahead and do whatever it is that they do. The speaker specifically uses imagery associated with pleasure and relaxation, the phrases "hang" and "fly their kites" suggesting the moon and stars can simply sprawl out at their leisure while the speaker is stuck in this stony prison.

Notice how the speaker's attitude has shifted from that first "evening" in the poem's opening stanza:

- When the poem began, the speaker described their fear and confusion in the darkness. And night in the poem has come represents the unknown, mystery, and confusion.
- But here, the speaker *invites* the nighttime, perhaps suggesting that the speaker has come to terms with this environment—or will be able to accept it, if only someone would tell the speaker their age! Perhaps their age is the shining glimmer of light—like a moonbeam or starlight—that the speaker would require to peacefully accept the darkness and loss of knowledge that otherwise fills the landscape.

The poem's final stanza concludes somewhat unexpectedly. So far, the last line of each stanza has alternated between two refrains, so the audience might expect "I do not know my age" to wrap up the poem. Or perhaps the audience would expect to read both refrains in the final stanza, given that this poem's structure resembles that of a villanelle.

However, the speaker does not repeat "I do not know my age" and instead proclaims "I **want** to know my age." Attention thus shifts from the speaker's lack of knowledge to their desire to regain that information (and the sense of identity and humanity it might bring). The speaker then closes out the poem with the line "Tell me how old I am."

Rather than providing a sense of completion, these lines seem to take the audience *back* to the beginning of the poem. At the end of the poem, the speaker faces the same questions, anxieties, and desires that they came into it with.

SYMBOLS

DAY AND NIGHT

Throughout the poem, the speaker contrasts day and night, which come to represent awareness versus ignorance. The speaker seeks knowledge—particularly of their own age—and finds it scary and confusing to be ignorant ("in the dark," so to speak). However, they don't feel at home in the glaring light of awareness, either, as it only exposes the full extent of their decline and limitations.

The poem begins in the evening, which is presented as mysterious and frightening to the speaker. The speaker then explains that "it is different" in the morning, but the knowledge that daylight offers is "too close," too immediate. Unable to "read" their surroundings comfortably, the speaker grows more aware of their own limitations in the stark light of day.

The speaker again contrasts day and night in the second half of the poem, emphasizing the exuberant vitality of light. The knowledge that the "Clambering lights" of dawn represent always escapes the speaker; it "never stay[s] long enough"—unlike ignorance, represented by night, which "fall[s] down" heavily on the speaker.

In the end, the speaker seems willing to remain in the dark ("Let the moon go hang [...]"), as long as they're permitted to know the simple fact of their own age. This glimmer of self-understanding—a small acknowledgment of their identity and worth—is all it would take, it seems, for the speaker to accept living in confusion, with the light of insight passing them by.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "At evening, something behind me. / I start for a second, I blench, / or staggeringly halt and burn."
- **Lines 5-7:** "In the morning it is different. / An open book confronts me, / too close to read in comfort."
- **Lines 21-23:** "Shadows fall down; lights climb. / Clambering lights, oh children! / you never stay long enough"
- **Lines 33-34:** "Let the moon go hang, / the stars go fly their kites"

BIRDS

The second half of the poem contains several lines' worth of bird imagery, which comes to symbolize the speaker's loss of youthful vitality. More broadly, it represents the fleeting nature of life and the decay that affects all living things.

First, the speaker—an ancient mountain, or an elderly person who feels like one—describes the rocky landscape around them as filled with "Stone wings" that have fallen to earth:

> Stone wings have sifted here
> with feathers hardening feathers.
> The claws are lost somewhere.

There's a strong sense of loss in these lines: birds are soft creatures that can fly away to freedom, but these "wings" have fallen to earth and "harden[ed]" into permanence. Meanwhile, the fierce "claws" that can attack, clutch, and so on are lost to time. The speaker feels weighed down and helpless.

The speaker then describes how their growing deafness makes "Bird-calls" seem to "dribble" faintly rather than resonate. Birdsong is typically associated with joy, beauty, and the youthful renewal of springtime, but the speaker, in old age, feels cut off from these things.

In other words, this symbolism helps show how trapped and isolated the ancient speaker feels. It evokes a loss of beauty, communication, ferocity, and freedom, suggesting various facets of the speaker's experience that have faded with time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-26:** "Stone wings have sifted here / with feathers hardening feathers"
- **Line 27:** "The claws are lost somewhere."
- **Lines 29-30:** "Bird-calls / dribble"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears throughout "The Mountain," highlighting key images and ideas. For instance, the poem's opening lines feature /s/ and /b/ sounds (which combine with the assonance of short /eh/ sounds for even more punch):

> I start for a second, I blench,
> or staggeringly halt and burn.

Here, alliteration creates sonic interest that helps draw the reader into the poem. Alliteration also helps shape the poem's mood, reflecting the images and events the speaker describes. In the second stanza, for instance, daylight "confronts" the speaker with a book that's "too close to read in comfort." The harsh, plosive /k/ sounds reinforce the characterization of daytime as hostile and unsettling.

Later, in lines 21-22, the speaker describes the liveliness of sunrise (and/or other lights in the morning sky) using /k/and /l/ alliteration and /i/ assonance: "lights climb. / Clambering lights [...]" The lights here seem to represent knowledge and understanding, which constantly elude the speaker ("never stay long enough"). Repetitive sounds evoke the way they energetically "clamber" out of reach.

Alliterative /n/ sounds also appear in one of the poem's two refrains, adding force to the speaker's complaint: "I do not know my age." Combined with repetition, this effect helps makes the statement memorable, strongly conveying the speaker's suffering as well as their desire to understand themselves.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "start," "second," "blench"
- **Line 3:** "staggeringly," "burn"
- **Line 4:** "not," "know"
- **Line 6:** "confronts"
- **Line 7:** "close," "comfort"
- **Line 12:** "not," "know"
- **Line 13:** "not," "mean"
- **Line 17:** "deepest," "demarcation"
- **Line 18:** "slowly," "spread," "sink"
- **Line 20:** "not," "know"
- **Line 21:** "lights," "climb"
- **Line 22:** "Clambering," "lights"
- **Line 27:** "claws," "lost"
- **Line 28:** "not," "know"
- **Line 30:** "waterfalls"
- **Line 31:** "unwiped," "What"

APOSTROPHE

Throughout "The Mountain," the speaker seems to address an audience that never replies, a device called apostrophe.

The exact target of the speaker's pleas is unknown; the speaker seems to cast about for someone to enlighten them, empathize with them, or at least acknowledge them. In this way, apostrophe underscores the speaker's isolation and desperation.

For readers, the speaker's pleas—phrases like "Tell me"—seem to be aimed at *them*; they feel personal. Accordingly, apostrophe helps forge a connection between speaker and reader. It encourages sympathy, as the speaker seems to cry out for the reader's help.

However, readers are, of course, unable to respond to the speaker or comfort them. Plus, readers *don't* know what the speaker wants to know so badly: how old the speaker is. Thus, empathetic readers may feel a curiosity about the speaker's age—and an inability to communicate—that reflects the speaker's own helpless position.

In a separate example of the apostrophe, the speaker also calls out to the "[c]lambering lights" that rise in the sky at dawn: "oh children! / you never stay long enough," the speaker says, linking such light with youth and vitality. Such things are fleeting, these lines suggest, and out of the speaker's grasp.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Tell me"
- **Line 16:** "Tell me"
- **Lines 22-23:** "oh children! / you never stay"
- **Line 24:** "Tell me"
- **Lines 31-32:** "What is my age? / Tell me"
- **Line 36:** "Tell me"

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly all of the poem's lines are end-stopped, making the speaker sound direct and insistent (and possibly short-winded due to age).

End-stopped lines also tend to emphasize the final word in each line. This device sometimes highlights thematically important words, such as "age" in the refrain, or the negative words that end lines 13-14:

> I do not mean to **complain.**
> They say it is my **fault.**

Here, end-stopping calls attention to the speaker's sense of neglect and shame—as well as the fact that the speaker *is* complaining, however poignantly.

Notice that all the end-stopped lines end with commas or periods, except for two: line 22 (which ends with an exclamation point) and line 31 (which ends with a question mark). These are moments of heightened emotion or confusion, as the speaker describes, respectively, the "lights" they love (sixth stanza) and their own deafness and deterioration (eighth stanza).

Finally, the use of all these end-stops makes the poem's few moments of enjambment more striking. Enjambment disrupts this pattern at certain moments, creating some ambiguity and irregularity. In fact, several of the poem's enjambments occur at moments when the speaker is confused or unable to perceive clearly: for example, "the valleys stuff / impenetrable mists / like cotton in my ears" (lines 9-11) and "Bird-calls / dribble" (lines 29-30).

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "me."
- **Line 2:** "blench,"
- **Line 3:** "burn."
- **Line 4:** "age."
- **Line 5:** "different."
- **Line 6:** "me,"
- **Line 7:** "comfort."
- **Line 8:** "am."
- **Line 11:** "ears."
- **Line 12:** "age."
- **Line 13:** "complain."
- **Line 14:** "fault."
- **Line 15:** "anything."
- **Line 16:** "am."
- **Line 19:** "tattoo."
- **Line 20:** "age."
- **Line 21:** "climb."
- **Line 22:** "children!"
- **Line 23:** "enough."
- **Line 24:** "am."
- **Line 26:** "feathers."
- **Line 27:** "somewhere."
- **Line 28:** "age."
- **Line 31:** "age?"
- **Line 32:** "am."
- **Line 33:** "hang,"
- **Line 34:** "kites."
- **Line 35:** "age."
- **Line 36:** "am."

IMAGERY

"The Mountain" contains a great deal of imagery. All these vivid sensory details help make the speaker's experience more immediate for the reader.

For example, as the poem opens, the speaker describes their startled reaction to sundown: "I start for a second, I blench, / or staggeringly halt and burn." Besides hooking the audience's

interest, these details help characterize the speaker as fearful and awkward.

As the poem goes on, imagery helps draw parallels between feeling old and feeling like (or being) a mountain. Lines 9-11, for example, describe valleys that surround the speaker with "mists" as if stuffing "cotton" into the speaker's "ears." Though the description is surprising and surreal, it sets up a parallel between an ancient mountain clouded by mist and an old person whose hearing is "clouded" by deafness.

Similarly, in lines 29-31, the speaker seems to translate deafness and incontinence—common struggles of the elderly—into nature imagery: "Bird-calls / dribble and the waterfalls / go unwiped." In their indirect way, these details capture the speaker's discomfort: faded, intermittent birdsong eludes the speaker, while water rushes uncomfortably over them.

Ultimately, such vivid descriptions help the audience understand the speaker's experience of growing old. In this way, imagery encourages sympathy for the speaker, as the audience seems to "witness" their struggle.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "I start for a second, I blench, / or staggeringly halt and burn"
- **Lines 6-7:** "An open book confronts me, / too close to read in comfort"
- **Lines 9-11:** "the valleys stuff / impenetrable mists / like cotton in my ears"
- **Lines 17-19:** "The deepest demarcation / can slowly spread and sink / like any blurred tattoo"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Shadows fall down; lights climb. / Clambering lights"
- **Line 25:** "Stone wings have sifted here"
- **Lines 29-31:** "Bird-calls / dribble and the waterfalls / go unwiped"
- **Lines 33-34:** "the moon go hang, / the stars go fly their kites"

METAPHOR

The poem contains a number of metaphors, which use a mountainous landscape—complete with "mists," "valleys," and "waterfalls"—to evoke the speaker's painful experience of old age.

The poem builds on an overarching extended metaphor, as it adopts the voice of an isolated mountain that seeks to understand its place in the world. This extended metaphor highlights key elements of the aging process. In particular, mountains are motionless and ancient, seemingly frozen in time but slowly eroding as the world carries on around them. The metaphor thus captures the speaker's advanced age, loneliness, and mobility problems in a vivid, surprising way.

More specific comparisons follow from this overarching metaphor, providing more insight into the speaker's struggles. For instance, the speaker/mountain compares hearing loss to thick mists clouding its peak: "valleys stuff / impenetrable mists [...] in my ears." This metaphor presents the mountain as impaired by its environment, suggesting that the speaker is impaired, even tormented, by age. Later, the speaker compares the blurring of memory and identity—markers of the self—to the gradual flattening of a deep crevice: "the deepest demarcation / can slowly spread and sink."

In general, the poem's metaphors translate abstractions (such as loneliness and the loss of youth) into imagery, helping the reader understand the speaker's experience of old age.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "An open book confronts me, / too close to read in comfort."
- **Lines 9-11:** "And then the valleys stuff / impenetrable mists / like cotton in my ears."
- **Lines 17-19:** "The deepest demarcation / can slowly spread and sink / like any blurred tattoo."
- **Lines 21-23:** "Shadows fall down; lights climb. / Clambering lights, oh children! / you never stay long enough."
- **Lines 25-27:** "Stone wings have sifted here / with feathers hardening feathers. / The claws are lost somewhere."
- **Lines 29-31:** "Bird-calls / dribble and the waterfalls / go unwiped."
- **Lines 33-34:** "Let the moon go hang, / the stars go fly their kites."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker frequently personifies elements of their environment, most often the natural landscape. This personification brings the setting to life and supports the poem's overarching extended metaphor that compares the speaker to a long-suffering mountain.

Each example of personification provides a more vivid account of the speaker's experience of aging. The surrounding world "confronts," impairs ("stuff / impenetrable mists"), and escapes ("clambering lights") the speaker. The speaker thus appears tormented by the aging process, all while in a hostile, unwelcoming environment that mocks or ignores the speaker's suffering.

In personifying the landscape, the speaker thus ultimately illustrates just how isolated they feel from the world around them. Even the "stars" are allowed to play ("go fly their kites") while the speaker is reduced to a stoic block of earth.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "An open book confronts me"
- **Lines 9-11:** "the valleys stuff / impenetrable mists / like cotton in my ears"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Shadows fall down; lights climb. / Clambering lights, oh children!"
- **Lines 33-34:** "Let the moon go hang, / the stars go fly their kites."

REFRAIN

Two refrains repeat throughout the poem: "I do not know my age" and "Tell me how old I am." The speaker's constant search for their age suggests a loss of identity and individuality—that the speaker no longer has a defined place within the (living) world, and desperately longs for some grounding knowledge about themselves.

On the one hand, the repetition of these pleas simply makes them more memorable for readers. At the same time, this repetition makes the pleas themselves feel all the more urgent and forceful—eventually, they seem outright frantic. The use of insistent refrains suggests the speaker's sheer desperation to know how much time has passed, or at least be acknowledged by their audience. And readers can assume that the speaker never gets a response, since the speaker returns to the same phrases over and over again.

More broadly, the fact that these refrains make up the last line of each stanza grants the poem a more defined structure and rhythm. This device essentially punctuates each stanza with a simple, end-stopped line. The repetitive, rhythmic quality of the refrains subtly reinforces the repetitiveness and monotony of the speaker's life.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "I do not know my age."
- **Line 8:** "Tell me how old I am."
- **Line 12:** "I do not know my age."
- **Line 16:** "Tell me how old I am."
- **Line 20:** "I do not know my age."
- **Line 24:** "Tell me how old I am."
- **Line 28:** "I do not know my age."
- **Line 31:** "What is my age?"
- **Line 32:** "Tell me how old I am."
- **Line 35:** "I want to know my age."
- **Line 36:** "Tell me how old I am."

SIMILE

This poem contains two similes, which make the speaker's description of the aging process feel more vivid, concrete, and memorable.

Both similes describe the speaker's loss of physical and mental agility. In the first, the speaker describes hearing loss by saying:

> [...] the valleys stuff impenetrable mists
> like cotton in my ears.

By comparing the mists that cloud the speaker's senses to cotton, this simile emphasizes just how thick and dense the metaphorical fog is. The audience understands that the speaker's hearing is greatly impaired, and therefore that aging has taken a significant toll on their senses.

In the poem's second simile, the speaker compares the gradual flattening of a deep boundary to "any blurred tattoo." The speaker specifically says:

> The deepest demarcation
> can slowly spread and sink
> like any blurred tattoo.

Tattoos are typically thought of as being permanent and individual, as easy ways to identify someone. This simile thus drives home the speaker's point that any identity marker—even "the deepest demarcation," however unique and permanent it may seem—can become faded and imprecise with time. The simile can be applied to nonphysical qualities too; the speaker implies that their memories and even certain personal traits have also faded. This comparison thus illustrates the speaker's uncertain identity and sense of place in the world as they grow older and lose pieces of who they are.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "And then the valleys stuff / impenetrable mists / like cotton in my ears."
- **Lines 17-19:** "The deepest demarcation / can slowly spread and sink / like any blurred tattoo."

VOCABULARY

Blench (Line 2) - "Blench" can mean two things:

- Move suddenly (due to fear, pain, etc.); flinch.
- Grow pale.

Both meanings suggest that the speaker is afraid.

Staggeringly (Line 3) - (Moving) unsteadily or unevenly, as if stumbling."Staggeringly" usually means "astonishingly"; this meaning might be implied, too (suggesting that the mountain looks astonishing in the evening light).

Inpenetrable (Line 10) - Dense and thick; unable to be passed through (or "penetrated"). "Impenetrable" can also mean complex and impossible to understand. Both meanings indicate that the mists hinder the speaker's understanding of the world around them.

Demarcation (Line 17) - A boundary; something that marks limits or sets an object, area, etc. apart from its surroundings.

Clambering (Line 22) - Moving clumsily and with great exertion, suggesting an urgent effort to get somewhere.

Sifted (Line 25) - Fallen slowly and delicately, as if through a sieve.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Mountain" doesn't adhere to the rules of any traditional poetic form. Instead, it follows its own unique structure. Each stanza has four lines, with the final line alternating between two refrains: "I do not know my age" and "Tell me how old I am."

This structure somewhat resembles the villanelle, a poetic form that also features alternating refrains at the end of each stanza. In the final lines of a villanelle, the refrains are directly paired for the first time, creating a strong sense of closure. However, in this poem, the final stanza contains a modified form of the first refrain, denying the audience a crisp resolution. The modified line—"I want to know my age"—sounds insistent and desperate, reinforcing the idea that the speaker's pleas go perpetually unanswered.

Closing stanza after stanza, the refrains provide order and regularity, as if punctuating each new statement. In this way, they highlight the speaker's fixation on the aging process. The consistent refrains also give the poem a song-like quality, making the speaker's monologue more poignant and memorable.

Overall, the poem's structure is repetitive but flows unevenly, due to the inconsistent meter and subtle variations in the refrains. It therefore reflects *both* the monotony of the speaker's life *and* the speaker's awkwardness as they struggle with the pain of aging.

METER

This poem is mostly written in accentual trimeter, meaning that there most lines contain three **strong** beats. These stresses can fall in any pattern, so they are surrounded by a varying number of unstressed syllables. Here's a look at the meter in the poem's opening lines, for example:

> At **eve**ning, **some**thing be**hind** me.
> I **start** for a **se**cond, I **blench**,
> or **stag**geringly **halt** and **burn**.
> I **do** not **know** my **age**.

The meter isn't exact (some lines have more than three stressed beats, and some lines are open to interpretation) but this generally gives the poem a pulsating regularity that reflects the speaker's repetitive existence. At the same time, variations in the pattern help maintain the poem's informal, conversational tone. These disruptions also suggest disturbances in the speaker's life: for example, when the speaker discusses deafness and uncleanliness in lines 29-31:

> I am **grow**ing **deaf**. Bird-calls
> **drib**ble and the **wat**erfalls
> go un**wiped**. What is my **age**?

Notice how the scattered stresses create a halting rhythm that seems to reflect the "dribbl[ing]" of the waterfalls, as well as the general sense of confusion and disorder in this stanza.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem does not follow a rhyme scheme, and it contains very few rhymes of any kind. This keeps things feeling conversational and unpredictable.

The few rhymes that do crop up, meanwhile, call attention to important images and ideas. For instance, there's a slant rhyme between "here" and "somewhere" (lines 25 and 27), a pair of words that reinforces the poem's themes of dislocation and loss. (The "Stone wings" are "here," but "The claws are lost somewhere"—and the speaker doesn't know where.) There's also an end rhyme between "Bird-calls" and "waterfalls" in the poem's penultimate stanza, which encourages readers to consider the relationship between these two words. Both are natural images that hint at the speaker's advanced age: the speaker can no longer clearly hear the "Bird-calls" around them or wipe the "waterfalls" that run down their body.

SPEAKER

The speaker is anonymous and reveals very little information about themselves. For instance, the speaker's gender (if any) and personal history remain unstated. In fact, the speaker seems uncertain about many facets of their own identity, which has "blurred" over time, and is especially confused about their age. This uncertainty encourages the reader to empathize with the speaker, who yearns to regain their lost self-knowledge.

Based on the poem's title, the speaker appears to be pleading with the audience from the perspective of an isolated, ancient mountain. (Another possibility is that they're human, and their "mountainness" is a metaphor for their personal condition.)

What *is* clear is that the speaker is very old. The speaker vividly describes their struggles to perceive their surroundings and remember details about their life. At the same time, they insist they "do not mean to complain." They seem to want companionship ("oh children! / you never stay long enough") and to feel like themselves again. The speaker is persistent and tenacious; they make short, authoritative statements and repeat the questions they most want answered, despite the lack of acknowledgment they receive.

SETTING

This poem takes place amid a scenic mountain range, complete with misty "valleys," birdsong, and "waterfalls." The poem's aging speaker takes the perspective of one of the mountains, characterizing it as ancient, lonely, and isolated from the vibrant surrounding world.

Misty valleys block the speaker's hearing, drowning out the lovely birdsong (a metaphor for hearing loss). Meanwhile, waterfalls, which erode mountains, are left "unwiped" to wreak havoc—perhaps a metaphor for incontinence. The earth is also scattered with lost bird claws and feathers, which serve as reminders of the freedom and agility that the speaker has lost.

The setting thus isn't so idyllic for the speaker; rather than comforting them, it seems to taunt them or confront them with their own limitations. The transformation of a beautiful, vital landscape into a site of pain and a reminder of loss reinforces the poem's implication that aging reshapes one's experience of the world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop was a celebrated American poet, as well as a short story writer and painter. Bishop's first collection, *North and South*, was published in 1946 and her second in 1955. Bishop won the Pulitzer Prize for the 1955 collection *North & South / A Cold Spring*, which contained poems from the first collection as well as new works. "The Mountain" appeared in *Poetry* magazine in the decade between these two popular collections, but after its publication in 1952, it was never collected in a volume during Bishop's lifetime.

Bishop created visual art throughout her life and kept multimedia journals. Her work is often described as imagistic, as she tends not to state her experiences outright or present a narrative, but to observe the world and encode her conclusions in minute descriptive details—often while exploring themes like belonging, loss, and yearning.

While she was at Vassar College, Bishop met Marianne Moore, who was already a leading figure in the poetry world. Moore encouraged Bishop's poetry, and the two writers remained friends throughout their lives, corresponding often. Moore's sharp descriptions and observational style were a major influence on Bishop's work.

After she met the prominent poet Robert Lowell in 1947, he became her chief literary companion and correspondent. Lowell was a pioneer of confessionalist poetry, which featured specific, unaltered details from real-life experiences, such as childhood trauma and psychological breakdowns. Although she encouraged Lowell, Bishop resisted the confessional mode and often criticized its other practitioners.

Some elements of Bishop's personal life do seep into her poems ("Sestina" and "In the Waiting Room" are two examples), but she tried to keep her personal life separate from her work. She was a gay woman writer in the male-dominated 20th-century literary world, and even her implied portrayals of same-sex love led to rejections from publications like *Poetry* and the *New Yorker*, so it's fair to see her restrained, indirect approach as both an artistic decision and a professional prerequisite. She explained that she didn't want to be judged on the basis of her sexual orientation or her gender, but on the quality of her work as a poet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After growing up in Nova Scotia, Canada and the northeastern United States, where she received her education, Bishop traveled extensively throughout southern Europe and northern Africa, recording many of her observations in verse.

Intending to take a short trip, Bishop traveled to Brazil in 1951 and ended up living there for 15 years. "The Mountain" was written during this period, and it's possible that the mountains Bishop describes are those she observed in Brazil, or during her other travels. (In fact, much of her work from this period contains mountain imagery, such as the "self-pitying mountains" in "Arrival At Santos" and "the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops" in "Questions of Travel," both of which echo the details in this poem.)

Bishop's extensive travels also fed her interest in international literature, and she published translations of poetry originally written in French, Spanish, and (most famously) Portuguese.

The mid-20th century was a tumultuous time in Brazil and, indeed, the globe, as political instability and social tensions bubbled over around the world. However, Bishop's poems, including "The Mountain," tend not to address conflicts and world events directly. Instead, they tend to confront universal human struggles, such as grief and the drive to be understood.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a recitation of "The Mountain." (https://voetica.com/voetica.php?collection=1&poet=13&poem=2768)
- Bishop's Biography — Read the Poetry Foundation's overview of the poet's life and career. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop)
- Bishop's Art of Losing — Browse this in-depth look at Bishop's personal life and relationships, including a discussion of their influence on her poetic output.

(https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/elizabeth-bishops-art-of-losing)

- How Are Mountains Formed? — Gain more insight into the poem's mountain imagery with this explanation of mountain formation. (https://sciencetrends.com/how-are-mountains-formed/)
- A Bishop Documentary — Watch this brief documentary on Bishop's life and career, courtesy of the classic Voices and Visions series. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XB6sJ-PeLo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BISHOP POEMS

- One Art
- The Fish

HOW TO CITE

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