

Mutability by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

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.

Notes:

In "Mutability," the speaker confronts the transitory nature of life, and also previews what Keats calls the "ambiguity of experience."

Shelley's lyrical solution is the application of his belief that "poetry marries exultation and horror, pain and pleasure"

The speaker concludes that the only authentic experience humans can have is a mixed one : one of joy and sorrow, melancholy and delight.

Discussion:

1. To whom does the "we" of the poem refer ?
2. In the first stanza, "we" are compared to clouds. What are the qualities of the clouds ?
3. In the second stanza, a different image is used - the lyre. How does this extend the view Shelley is presenting ?
4. Read aloud the 3rd stanza. How would you describe the overall effect or mood ?
5. "Nought may endure but mutability." Is this a hopeful or despairing conclusion ?