

Percy bysshe shelley: poetry and the individual

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



Working at the height of the Romantic Era, Percy Bysshe Shelley set the standard for literature of the period. Consistently using the conventional comparisons between humans and nature, Shelley in his poetry emphasizes man's ability to remove himself from the commonplace and initiate change, and to produce new ideas through the power of imagination and creativity. Similarly in *A Defense of Poetry*, Shelley attempts to establish poetry's place in a rapidly changing, industrialized world. He wrote his defense in response to Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry*, which urged great minds to stop wasting their time with humanities, especially poetry, and put their intellectual efforts toward the newly emerging sciences. With that being said, *A Defense of Poetry* argues for poetry's utilitarian function, claiming the use of language demonstrates human impulse to mimic the rhythmic and ordered that is instinctively incorporated into creative activities. Accordingly, Shelley's poem "Mutability" employs that same structure, following traditional expectations of a lyric poem, in order to present life as ephemeral. A solemn, reflecting poem, "Mutability" explicates the ever-changing nature of humanity. In both poetry and prose, Shelley emphasizes the inevitability of change, poetry's contribution to society, and individual insignificance.

By definition, 'mutable' refers to something inconstant and prone to change. Interestingly, in his poem "Mutability," Shelley presents this change as the only reliable aspect of life. His final proclamation of "nought may endure but Mutability" highlights perpetual impermanence, the poem's general theme (16). In addition, in *A Defense of Poetry*, Shelley writes: "All high poetry is infinite (...) a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and

delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence, which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds" (Defense xvii). Essentially, Shelley is suggesting a poem never results in a final, definite interpretation; instead, the meaning adapts to future generations. Similarly, in "Mutability," Shelley emphasizes man's continual struggle to deal with the ever-changing state of the universe.

Another example of Shelley reiterating the imminence of change involves his comparisons to an Aeolian lyre in both "Mutability" and A Defense of Poetry. In "Mutability," Shelley depicts humans as "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" (5-8). With this materialistic imagery, Shelley presents the frailty of human mortality and how quickly humans, as well as their art, can be easily forgotten. Yet, the analogy between men and Aeolian harps suggests humans are capable of attaining melody as well as harmony. Implicitly, Shelley indicates mankind has the ability to build from one thought or experience (one note) and expand his thoughts (to a musical string of notes) in a way to bring about change that will lead to a more fulfilling existence (by developing musical harmony). Thus, in A Defense of Poetry, Shelley similarly claims "man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre" (Defense 2). It is only once Shelley reconciles with the inevitability of change that he is able to maintain his belief that "poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful which is distorted" (Defense 10).

In *A Defense of Poetry*, Shelley claims “poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man” (Defense 12-13). In accordance with this line of thought, the tone of “*Mutability*” remains objective in regard to the changeable nature of the universe. Where science does not require one to explore personal moral judgment, the humanities allow for mental and emotional expansion. This idea extends to the narrative voice of “*Mutability*,” which belongs to an individual neither saddened nor elated by the ever-adapting state of the world. With either the choice to “laugh or weep,” or to experience “joy or sorrow,” the reader is allowed to “cast [their] cares away” (11-13). In short, Shelley does not manipulate his reader into a specific emotion, but instead leaves open-ended interpretation for one’s places within the universe. Intentionally, Shelley allows room for speculation within his poetry because “the great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause” (Defense 14).

A Defense of Poetry argues for man “to be greatly good, [he] must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own;” subsequently, it is important to consider how Shelley uses “*Mutability*” to educate his readers on society’s meaningless and insignificant nature (Defense 14). It can be argued that “*Mutability*” “lifts the veil” off human importance and exposes individual significance through imagery and extended metaphors. For example, humanity is metaphorically compared to a cloud in the first stanza: “We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon” (1). A result of mother nature, the cloud does not protect the moon but

instead only serves to “ veil” it. In addition, the lyre requires someone to play it and fulfill its purpose. Throughout the poem, Shelley’s comparisons between humans and nature highlight the interdependence between these two spheres of activity. In typical Romantic fashion, Shelley removes individual agency and places all power in the hands of nature. And in accordance with his *Defense of Poetry*, Shelley uses his poetry to “ lif[t] the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and mak[e] familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (*Defense* 13).

Shelley uses both his poetry and prose to highlight the inevitability of change within the human realm. An analysis of both *A Defense of Poetry* and “ *Mutability*” reveals Shelley’s deep concern with the benefits and advantages of poetry. Through intense imagery and ample metaphorical comparisons, Shelley models his poetry by his own standards. Believing poetry to be able incite moral good within a society, he leaves the interpretation of “ *Mutability*” up for debate as time progresses. By emphasizing the insignificance of human existence, Shelley simultaneously highlights the need for literature within a society.

Works Cited

Shelley, Percy. *A Defense of Poetry*. Ed. Albert Cook. Boston: Ginn & Company, 1891. Print.

—. “ *Mutability*.” *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Shelley*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. Oxford: Project Gutenberg, 2003. eBook.