Two Poems by Shelley – Mutability and An Exhortation

‘Nought may endure but Mutability’ (aka ‘The only Constant is Change’)

I have found two poems by Shelley called Mutability.  Here they are, together with a poem on a similar theme by Thomas Moore. Whichever one you are studying or teaching, my comments / suggestions apply fairly equally.

**Mutability I**

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.

**Mutability II**

The flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow dies;
All that we wish to stay
Tempts and then flies.
What is this world's delight?
Lightning that mocks the night,
Brief even as bright.

II.
Virtue, how frail it is!
Friendship how rare!
Love, how it sells poor bliss
For proud despair!
But we, though soon they fall,
Survive their joy, and all
Which ours we call.

III.
Whilst skies are blue and bright,
Whilst flowers are gay,
Whilst eyes that change ere night
Make glad the day;
Whilst yet the calm hours creep,
Dream thou -- and from thy sleep
Then wake to weep.

**All That's Bright Must Fade**Thomas Moore

All that's bright must fade, --
The brightest still the fleetest;
All that's sweet was made
But to be lost when sweetest.
Stars that shine and fall;
The flower that drops in springing;
These, alas! are types of all
To which our hearts are clinging.

Who would seek or prize
Delights that end in aching?
Who would trust to ties
That every hour are breaking?
Better far to be
In utter darkness lying,
Than to be blest with light and see
That light for ever flying.

*from
The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore.*

We tend to furrow brows and sigh when the meaning of a poem is unclear, but when the theme is straightforward, what is there to say about it?  This seems to me to be the problem facing teachers of poems such as Mutability, where the theme is clear enough: everything changes, 'all things must pass'; existence moves from birth through life to death. It's hardly a new thought.

My answer would be (1) to look at the form and language - i.e. *how* the message is communicated; (2) to examine the poet's attitude to his theme; and (3) to compare the poem with others which cover similar ground.

(1a) *Ask students if they find striking images or examples, or interesting language?*
How effective is the image of the lyres? Could students update the image? Like forgotten guitars with strings out of tune, playing different notes each time the wind blows across them...and which notes are lost, never to be heard again. (Is this a good paraphrase or not? Why?)
'The flower that smiles today, tomorrow dies' is not going to live on my memory. But the image of 'delight' as lightning which is brief (and powerful) but transient is more striking...

(1b) *Ask students to note nouns which are abstract and those which are concrete*.
The language is general and abstract, rarely the sign of poetry we are going to recall. There is more to note in the punctuation: all those exclamations!
(1c) *Ask students what they deduce from this?* (adolescent angst, tired and emotional, depressed?)

(2) *Ask students what if anything the writer offers by way of compensation - positive thoughts...*
Shelley does enjoin us to enjoy what is good while it is there - 'Whilst skies are blue and bright, / Whilst flowers are gay, / Whilst eyes that change ere night / Make glad the day'. It's hardly a rousing call to 'Seize the Day!' but it's the best he can manage.   There are also a few insights which perhaps cause a flash of recognition - that a thought can weigh on our mind and spoil an otherwise pleasant day, for example.

(3) *Provide some comparisons.* There are plenty of poems with which to compare these. Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn or 'to a Nightingale' would be fruitful contrasts. These are more substantial poems and what gives them their strength apart from their length is the *anchoring of the theme to a concrete example* - i.e. the urn or the nightingale.

**Further Suggestions***Ask students to try reading the poems - or individual verses - in a variety of voices; have them adopt appropriate postures:
petulant; cross; resentful; resigned; maudlin - what else?*

*Ask students to search for poems and song lyrics with a similar theme*.  Having found them, there is material for a fruitful discussion.

*Ask students to try editing the poems so that they become more optimistic.*
E.g. Though a dream has power to poison sleep, we rest.

**An Exhortation**

This is a useful poem to compare with ‘Mutability .

Chameleons feed on light and air:

 Poets' food is love and fame:

If in this wide world of care

 Poets could but find the same

With as little toil as they,

 Would they ever change their hue

 As the light chameleons do,

Suiting it to every ray

 Twenty times a day?

Poets are on this cold earth,

 As chameleons might be,

Hidden from their early birth

 In a cave beneath the sea;

Where light is, chameleons change:

 Where love is not, poets do:

 Fame is love disguised: if few

Find either, never think it strange

 That poets range.

Yet dare not stain with wealth or power

 A poet's free and heavenly mind:

If bright chameleons should devour

 Any food but beams and wind,

They would grow as earthly soon

 As their brother lizards are.

 Children of a sunnier star,

Spirits from beyond the moon,

 Oh, refuse the boon!

Shelley has been thinking about chameleons. Not only do they change their skin colour in response to their environment, it was thought that they lived on 'light and air'.

The poem neatly comprises the three kinds of sentences we are taught exist in English: questions, statements and commands. You might ask students: what is the question? what is the statement? what is the command (or exhortation)? (Get them to look up 'exhortation'. Ask them to create an exhortation of their own!)

Thus, the poem moves from a situation of (real or mock?) uncertainty, through growing certainty to a final stanza which is so sure of itself that it tells others what to do.

Underlying these developments, though, is a strong assertiveness. The poet tells us things as if they were unarguable. Poets' food is love and fame. (Really?) Fame is love disguised. (Is it?) Poets have free and heavenly minds. (Hmmm...)

Try hot-seating Shelley, perhaps in a pub setting, where his fellow drinkers/questioners are an artist or musician, a scientist, a shopkeeper etc. Get them to challenge him on his lofty ideas about poets. Remember, he was also the one who declared ‘Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.’ Before dismissing this grandiose claim, it’s worth directing students to his ‘Defence of Poetry’, summaries of which can be found on the internet.

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