

The Cloud

BY [PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY](#)

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and the streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noonday dreams.
From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds every one,
When rocked to rest on their mother's breast,
As she dances about the sun.
I wield the flail of the lashing hail,
And whiten the green plains under,
And then again I dissolve it in rain,
And laugh as I pass in thunder.

I sift the snow on the mountains below,
And their great pines groan aghast;
And all the night 'tis my pillow white,
While I sleep in the arms of the blast.
Sublime on the towers of my skiey bowers,
Lightning my pilot sits;
In a cavern under is fettered the thunder,
It struggles and howls at fits;
Over earth and ocean, with gentle motion,
This pilot is guiding me,
Lured by the love of the genii that move
In the depths of the purple sea;
Over the rills, and the crags, and the hills,
Over the lakes and the plains,
Wherever he dream, under mountain or stream,
The Spirit he loves remains;
And I all the while bask in Heaven's blue smile,
Whilst he is dissolving in rains.

The sanguine Sunrise, with his meteor eyes,
And his burning plumes outspread,
Leaps on the back of my sailing rack,
When the morning star shines dead;
As on the jag of a mountain crag,
Which an earthquake rocks and swings,
An eagle alit one moment may sit
In the light of its golden wings.
And when Sunset may breathe, from the lit sea beneath,
Its ardours of rest and of love,
And the crimson pall of eve may fall

From the depth of Heaven above,
With wings folded I rest, on mine aëry nest,
As still as a brooding dove.

That orbèd maiden with white fire laden,
Whom mortals call the Moon,
Glides glimmering o'er my fleece-like floor,
By the midnight breezes strewn;
And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,
Which only the angels hear,
May have broken the woof of my tent's thin roof,
The stars peep behind her and peer;
And I laugh to see them whirl and flee,
Like a swarm of golden bees,
When I widen the rent in my wind-built tent,
Till calm the rivers, lakes, and seas,
Like strips of the sky fallen through me on high,
Are each paved with the moon and these.

I bind the Sun's throne with a burning zone,
And the Moon's with a girdle of pearl;
The volcanoes are dim, and the stars reel and swim,
When the whirlwinds my banner unfurl.
From cape to cape, with a bridge-like shape,
Over a torrent sea,
Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof,
The mountains its columns be.
The triumphal arch through which I march
With hurricane, fire, and snow,
When the Powers of the air are chained to my chair,
Is the million-coloured bow;
The sphere-fire above its soft colours wove,
While the moist Earth was laughing below.

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
And the nursling of the Sky;
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;
I change, but I cannot die.
For after the rain when with never a stain
The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
And the winds and sunbeams with their convex gleams
Build up the blue dome of air,
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise and unbuild it again.

Summary and Analysis The Cloud

Summary

The cloud brings rain, moisture, hail, and snow, and gives shade. It is infused with electricity which acts as its guide in the form of lightning accompanied by thunder. When the cloud covers the rising sun, it causes its beams to be spread out over the sky. At evening the cloud floats over the setting sun like a bird; at night, the cloud provides a thin covering for the moon. Where the cloud cover is removed by the wind, the moon and stars are reflected in the earth's bodies of water.

The cloud under certain conditions forms a ring around the sun and the moon. During storms the cloud spreads across the sky like a roof. At other times the rainbow acts as an arch of triumph for the cloud to march under. The cloud, formed in the sky, draws its substance from the earth and water below it and is part of a never-ending cycle in which it alternately disappears and reappears.

Analysis

In "The Cloud," Shelley is again the myth-maker. The cloud is not merely a physical substance but seems to be an immortal minor divinity (such as a naiad or a Nereid, which in classical mythology were associated with water). By employing this form of personification, Shelley is able to endow nature with the powers and attributes of immortals. Thus his cloud is not only capable of changing its form almost at will but is incapable of dying as well: "I change, but I cannot die."

Shelley's cloud is almost bewilderingly multiform. It begins as a gardener watering flowers, changes to a mother or nurse shading a child from the midday sun while the child takes a nap, becomes a bird that shakes dew from its wings to awaken the buds (which are babies rocked to rest on the breast of their mother the earth), and becomes a thresher wielding a flail. It laughs, sifts, sleeps, folds its wings like a bird, puts a girdle around the sun, becomes a roof, marches through a triumphal arch, is a baby daughter, passes "through the pores of the ocean and shores," and tears down an empty tomb. As a divinity, it can be and do a multiplicity of things. Shelley's "The Cloud" is compact with images, which, taken together, give the reader a good account of this natural phenomenon in the language of poetry.

Shelley's "Cloud," although extraordinarily rich in changing imagery, presents no special difficulty except perhaps in the second stanza, in which he makes lightning the pilot of the cloud. What Shelley is saying is that atmospheric electricity or lightning is formed in the tiny droplets of vapor that make up the clouds. He is merely asserting a familiar fact.

In addition to making lightning the guide of the cloud, Shelley subordinates the lightning to some force in the earth which attracts it. He has his cloud say:

Over earth and ocean, with gentle motion,
This pilot is guiding me,
Lured by the love of the genii that move

In the depths of the purple sea;
Over the rills, and the crags, and the hills,
Over the lakes and the plains,
Wherever he dream, under mountain or stream,
The Spirit he loves remains.

Shelley's genii are Moslem spirits that inhabit the earth and exercise supernatural power. Erasmus Darwin, an eighteenth-century poet-scientist, had used the word metaphorically in his *Botanic Garden*, where Shelley probably found it. The Spirit whom the lightning loves seems to be the genii in a singular form, but Shelley is not very clear here. He may have changed from the plural to the singular for the sake of a needed rime: *remains*. The genii are probably meant to poetically present the theory of atmospheric electricity, drawn by the sun from the earth as water vapor, returning to the earth as lightning, dew, frost, and rain. Shelley's genii therefore represents the phenomenon that when an electrically charged cloud approaches the earth's surface, an opposite charge is induced in the earth's surface. When there exists sufficient electrical potential, a lightning flash occurs. Shelley's knowledge of atmospheric electricity, although expressed in highly figurative language, is nevertheless accurate.