

**“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty**  
**by Percy Shelley (1816)**

Percy Shelley’s poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* was written in the summer of 1816 at the same time Shelley wrote his poem *Mont Blanc* and his future wife Mary Godwin was beginning her Gothic tale *Frankenstein*. The year was also significant in literature circles for it was the year that saw the birth of both Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë and the publication of Jane Austen’s *Emma*

**STANZA 1**

Shelley, in *The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, speaks of a mysterious power – which he calls “**The awful shadow of some unseen Power.**” What he meant by this “**unseen Power**” is the power of understanding of man’s place in the universe, a power that is unreachable or even unknowable. Shelley is saying that man may work his schemes, go about his business, but ultimately is incapable of reaching the ultimate goal – that of understanding fully man’s reason for being here, for existing. In Stanza 1 Shelley uses metaphors, which I see as expressing man’s inability to grasp this source of power: “**As summer winds that creep from flower to flower – / Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower ... / Like clouds in starlight widely spread – / Like memory of music fled...**”

These are evocative images – romantic and beautiful. We can see and believe that these images exist in nature, but we cannot capture a moonbeam, or a fleeting memory, any more than we can capture the “**shadow of some unseen Power.**” We value these things in our lives and their very mysteriousness, as Shelley says, makes them dearer to us.



**STANZA 2**

In Stanza 2 I believe that Shelley is talking about man’s “**loss of beauty,**” of his inherent capacity to turn his back on nature and imagination. In a sense Shelley might have seen himself as doing this, and the summer in which he wrote this poem was a time when he was rediscovering the wonders of nature. He speaks of the: “**Spirit of BEAUTY... where art thou gone? / Why dost thou pass away and leave our state, / This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?**”

He also uses dualities, how “**man has such a scope for love and hate, despondency and hope?**” He is asking why man should suffer negative feelings such as despondency and why he must eventually face death. The line: “**Ask why the sunlight not for ever / Weaves rainbows o’er yon mountain-river,**” for example, asks why mankind cannot live in eternal sunlight, without the gloom and misery. He may be saying that if man could find the “**unseen Power**” he will no longer suffer as he does and the sunlight will shine forever.



### STANZA 3

Stanza 3 speaks of how humans try to understand – but fail to do so. We give the unknown power names – **Demon, Ghost, Heaven** – in a vain attempt to comprehend what we are incapable of understanding. Only the unseen Power can give “**grace and truth to life’s unquiet dream,**” Our lives are unstable and brief, expressed by Shelley when he uses phrases such as “**Doubt, chance, and mutability.**” By using such phrases I believe that Shelley is saying that our lives are uncertain, changeable, and that only the mysterious “**unseen Power**” can give us peace and tranquility.

### STANZA 4

This verse seems very dark. The “**unseen Power**” is back as “**the messenger of sympathies**” who offers nourishment to human thought. But Shelley seems very pessimistic and talks of darkness, of the “**the awful shadow**” from Stanza 1, enveloping us. He is saying that if this “**power**” goes then man may discover that death is not the beginning of something more wonderful, but, “**Like life and fear, a dark reality,**” and that without understanding in life, perhaps there is no redemption for man after death.

### STANZA 5

Shelley is recounting a moment in his childhood when he believes he grasped that elusive spirit of understanding. He had sought it in ghosts, caves, ruins and forests, hoping for “**high talk with the departed dead.**” With a childhood innocence and lack of fear the spirit found him: “**thy shadow fell on me,**” as he says. With sheer ecstasy he had found and lost what he and man was looking for.



### STANZAS 6-7

In the final two Stanzas of *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, Shelley – having found the “**spirit of Beauty**”, the “**unseen Power,**” or whatever you want to call it, perhaps even God – vowed to dedicate his powers to it, but he seems unsatisfied with the response. It is almost as if he has prayed for the power to, as he says: “**free / this world from its dark slavery,**” but it hasn’t come about. He is looking for the eternal truth and hasn’t found it. His references to the passing of summer in Stanza 7 and the coming of autumn is surely a metaphor for the passing of time and life, and he refers back to his youth and the “**truth of nature**” he found then.



**LINK TO MONT BLAN :** The link between the poems *Mont Blanc* and *The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* is in the attempt by man to gain an understanding of his place in the universe. In the former poem, also written in the same summer of 1816, Shelley talks of the **Power** that man seeks – representing it with the awesome nature of the mountain Mont Blanc. He compares the mountain to man's ascent to **understanding** – we might make our way up the foothills and settle on its lower reaches, but we will never achieve the goal of reaching the summit and complete understanding. Of course, in Shelley's time, Mont Blanc had not been conquered so he could use the metaphor without contradiction. Whether he would have thought that those who eventually conquered the mountain gained the sought-after **understanding** is anyone's guess. He would, however, have had to find a more lasting metaphor.

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*I*

The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
Floats through unseen among us, – visiting  
This various world with an inconstant wing  
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower, – Like moonbeams that behind some piny  
mountain shower,  
It visits with inconstant glance  
Each human heart and countenance;  
Like hues and harmonies of evening, – Like clouds in starlight widely spread, –  
Like memory of music fled, – Like aught that for its grace may be Dear, and yet dearer for its  
mystery.

*II*

Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate  
With thine own hues all thou shine upon  
Of human thought or form, – where are thou gone? Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,  
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate? Ask why the sunlight not for ever Weaves rainbows  
o'er yon mountain-river,  
Why aught should fail and fade that once is shown,  
Why fear and dream and death and birth  
Cast on the daylight of this earth Such gloom, – why man has such a scope For love and hate,  
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### *III*

No voice from some sublimer world hath ever  
To sage or poet these responses given –  
Therefore the names of Demon, Ghost, and Heaven,  
Remain the records of their vain endeavour,  
Frail spells – whose uttered charm might not avail to server, From all all we hear and all we see,  
Doubt, chance, and mutability.  
Thy light alone – like mist o'er mountains drive,  
Or music by the night-wind sent  
Through strings of some still instrument, Or moonlight on a midnight stream, Gives grace and truth  
to life's unquiet dream.

### *IV*

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart And come, for some uncertain moments lent.  
Man were immortal, and omnipotent,  
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,  
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.  
Thou messenger of sympathies, That wax and wane in lovers' eyes –  
Thou – that to human thought art nourishment, Like darkness to a dying flame!  
Depart not as thy shadow came,  
Depart not – lest the grave should be, Like life and fear, a dark reality.

### *V*

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin, And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.  
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed,  
I was not heard – I saw them not – When musing deeply on the lot  
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing  
All vital things that wake to bring  
News of birds and blossoming, – Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;  
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in ecstasy!

*VI*

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers To thee and thine – have I not kept the vow?  
With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now  
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours  
Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bowers Of studious zeal or love's delight  
Outwatched with me the envious night – They know that never joy illumed my brow  
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free  
This world from its dark slavery,  
That Thou – O awful LOVELINESS,  
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.

*VII*

The day becomes more solemn and serene  
When noon is past – there is a harmony  
In autumn, and a lustre in its sky, Which though the summer is not heard or seen, As if it could not  
be, as if it had not been!  
Thus let thy power, which like the truth  
Of nature on my passive youth  
Descended, to my onward life supply  
Its calm – to one who worships thee,  
And ever form containing thee, Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind To fear himself, and love all  
human kind.